

**Shift happens? Exploring the Exception Question in Solution-  
focused Therapy**

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**by**

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## **Abstract**

Solution-focused therapy is appropriate for students in secondary schools as it works to revive children's problem solving abilities. A key technique in solution-focused therapy involves asking the client the Exception Question, that is, inviting them to consider and talk about a time when their problem is or was less severe and dealt with in a satisfactory way. There is a scarcity of research exploring this technique from the client's perspective. The aim of my study was to tell the stories of how students in a high school setting experience creative uses of the solution-focused, Exception Question.

During the study, however, I found that this could not be researched without also including the way(s) that the use of Exception Questions influenced my counselling and ongoing learning as a counsellor. Solution-focused therapy was used in the counselling sessions and my research brought together students' personal stories of their counselling experience and stories of my own learning as a student counsellor. A narrative case study methodology and narrative analysis enabled me to expand the description of the stories, so that the stories showed ways a shift or change had taken place for those involved. Concurrently, I analysed my parallel reflections as these unfolded through supervision conversations. It was my intention to write this thesis in such a way that was accessible and helpful to other counsellors and counselling students.

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Background and context for the study**

Solution-focused counselling has a growing research base and is used widely in education. Its roots (O'Connell, 2005) lie in empowerment, self-esteem and hope to establish a partnership with clients to help them establish what they want different in their lives. I became interested in the underpinning idea of solution-focused therapy that there are always exceptions to a problem. However, I found it difficult to change my mindset and, rather than focusing on the problem – after all, clients seek counselling because they have a 'problem' – instead look for times when this problem did not exist or prevail. I realised I wanted to find out more about this approach, and explore its value when working with students.

My interest in looking at creative uses of the strengths-based Exception Question grew from many years working in early childhood education and my passionate conviction that stories and storytelling can bring about positive change for young children and their families. I found stories could provide hope. My particular interest was incorporating personal stories into the programme and using these stories to think and talk about as well as enact those things that were important in young children's lives at any given time. I was involved in research as a Centre of Innovation (Henson, Smith and Mayo, 2009). Our research evidenced how creative uses of storytelling builds not only relationships and identity but can also address personal problems in ways that are non-threatening and memorable. This constructive way of working in an early childhood context combined with a questioning stance on the current direction of early childhood education led me into counsellor training, and provided a platform and a spur for exploring solution-focused therapy.

Solution-focused therapy focuses on the everyday life of clients and how they function with family, friends, teachers and others (Berg and Steiner, 2003). This is achieved through uncovering the skills, abilities, strengths and competencies that they already have and bringing these to the fore (Berg and Dolan, 2001). This approach connects with my experience in early childhood teaching.

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum, Te Whariki (Ministry of Education, 1996) identifies children as competent and confident learners and communicators who are healthy in mind, body, and spirit. I reminded myself of this as I began this study and my work with adolescents. Solution-focused therapy is also competency based and positions the client as



the expert in their own life with the skills and resources to find solutions to life's challenges (Jones-Smith, 2012). Solution-focused therapy offers a two-way perspective, looking backwards at exception times and, concurrently, forwards by thinking about how strategies and competencies can be used to move beyond current obstacles and challenges. Exception times are those occasions when the problem may have been expected to occur but for some reason it didn't, and the client is asked to consider and talk about these as a way of exploring possible ways of dealing with the current problem. Positioning myself, as an early childhood teacher transitioning into the role of a high-school counsellor, I was interested in bringing about positive change for students by looking at exception times and by concentrating on and promoting students' competencies and success.

The alignment of the counsellor role and the Key Competencies outlined in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) also interested me. The Key Competencies outlined in this document are: Thinking; Using Language, Symbols and Texts; Managing self; Relating to Others; and Participating and Contributing. Colin Hughes, Alison Burke, Judith Graham, Kathie Crocket & Elmarie Kotzé (2013) acknowledge how these competencies use language with a value focus and centre around learning for life beyond school. The Key Competencies are part of the curriculum in an interpretative context rather than a prescriptive one. Solution-focused therapy is a client-driven endeavour and is therefore interpretative also: there is no ultimate truth or right way of doing things. Using solution-focused therapy provides opportunities to be creative and responsive to different ways of doing things.

As I transitioned my thinking from that of an early childhood teacher to that of a student counsellor working with adolescents I was aware of the assumption that counselling is a talking profession. Insoo Kim Berg and Therese Steiner (2003) acknowledge nonverbal ways that children communicate; how children use their bodies and expressions, their imaginations, and creativity to communicate when they cannot do so verbally. Although Berg and Steiner focused on the ways children communicate, their finding was highly relevant to my study with adolescents – especially given the reluctance of some adolescents to talk directly and openly about their problems. While familiar and comfortable working creatively with young children, I was less familiar working creatively with adolescents.

Peter De Jong and Insoo Kim Berg (2008) acknowledge that there are no limits to people's creativity if what they want different in their lives is respected and used as a starting point to work collaboratively in solution building. This creative aspect of solution-focused therapy was of interest to me as it offered so much scope for possibilities. The idea that problems are best understood in relation to their solutions (De Shazer, 1985) inspired me as I considered my interest in the Exception Question.

My reflective journal became an important place to review some of the things that were happening in my research, alongside other things that were going on in my life at the time. I included some of these reflections in my write-up in their original form, as they helped me to make meaning of the study. They are my stories – personal to me – and shared because I do not break myself into parts: my personal life influences my professional and academic lives and vice versa. The transitional space that I was in, between early childhood teacher and counsellor, was best summarised in a reflection in my journal from the beginning of the year.

### **Reflection 1: “A Transitional Space”**

As I think about solution-focused therapy and the research I will be undertaking I am aware that my interest is in being open to learn new ways to discover students' abilities to solve their own problems. I want to be open to learn from them. In class last year I recall the class handout we were given by Jim Walt on 'walking backwards' – and relying on the client's eyes for direction on what to do next. This metaphor was introduced to us to consider where we might position ourselves as counsellors. I am drawn to the idea of focusing on real life outside of the counselling room and I'm interested in transferable skills - those I already have from my early childhood background and to see any contextual relevance in the new setting of a high school. I want to explore exception times and when, where and how they occurred and to use these abilities to arrive at solutions. I'm curious where my own exceptions may be found in this new context. (Kay's Reflective Journal, January 7 2013)

## **1.2 The Organisation of this thesis**

This thesis was written as an unfolding story. Chapter 1 provides a background to and context for my study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on solution-focused therapy as it sits within the theoretical framework of social constructionism, in particular looking into the Exception Question. In this chapter I also consider research into the therapeutic alliance,

which leads into a discussion about working with adolescents. Chapter 3 outlines my rationale and the research questions that guided my research. I then discuss the methodology of a narrative case study and the role of a reflective practitioner. Chapter 3 also outlines my methods of data collection, with a description of the different types of data I collected, and provides an explanation of narrative analysis. The chapter concludes by setting out and justifying the way the stories are organised in the three chapters which follow.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the stories of the participating students: Emily (4), Larry (5) and Julie and Bethany (6). The stories are presented in a triadic arrangement. Each story corresponds with a counselling session and I provide a transcription of this session. I then present The Counsellor's Story, which describes the story of each counselling experience from my perspective, embedding this experience in the wider contexts of being a student counsellor and researcher. Finally, the Analysis of each story/session explicates and organises my thoughts in line with my research questions.

In Chapter 7 I reflect on issues that arose and how these may have influenced processes or outcomes. Chapter 8 concludes the story and the study by drawing out themes and lessons from each of the cases and reflecting on their importance to me in my role as a counsellor. Reading the stories in this way helps me to appreciate the impact each had on me at the time, and it suggests ways in which I might apply these ideas and lessons to work I do in the future.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This study focuses on counselling in a high school. Most school counsellors are university trained and are encouraged to research their practice. Over time there have been changes to theoretical foundations of counselling approaches. The following review of literature begins by looking at an overview of social constructionism and how solution-focused therapy sits within this. It then looks at the central tenets of solution-focused therapy, explores how the Exception Question works within this, and how solution-focused therapy aligns with narrative therapy. It also explores issues surrounding the relationship between the counsellor and client, and looks at the particular reality of working with adolescents in a high-school setting.

### **2.1 The theoretical framework of social constructionism**

Social constructionism emerged to challenge absolute truths about the way we think about society. This approach suggests that there are no fixed or essential aspects to society, but rather that they are shaped by human interaction and exist in people's minds (Bogdan and Biklen, 2006). People construct their own truths according to this paradigm. I am drawn to social constructionism and a post modern ideology where the therapist rejects the role of expert and places more emphasis on the client- as-expert (Corey, 2012).

Social constructionism makes clear the possibility that we have different ways of thinking that change over time. Social constructionists are interested in ways of understanding that are culturally and historically positioned (Burr, 1996) that emerge through social processes and interactions. Burr contends that these understandings are influenced by the language used to represent and describe them to make meaning and that "ideas of identity and power are important constructs that support change" (49). These ideas underpin my interest in solution-focused therapy and the Exception Question.

### **2.2 Solution-focused therapy**

Solution-focused therapy is a practice-based model used to help people find solutions to life's challenges. It trusts in the expertise of the clients to choose what is important to them in their lives. Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg pioneered this approach of carefully observing and reflecting on the ways they work with clients to find out, from the clients, more about what is useful and helpful to them (Jong and Berg, 2008). Solution-focused therapy has evolved

and been adapted to work in a variety of settings, and it continues to develop through professional inquiry and an openness to learn from clients (Berg and Steiner, 2003). One of the primary tenets of the model is if something is working to do more of it. As such it is not opposed to other treatments or interventions that are being helpful to the client and can be used in addition to or as a component of comprehensive treatment.

It is based on social constructionist principles which highlight how we communicate with each other, how we fulfil our needs and how we organise ourselves to “get up every day to live” (Jones-Smith, 2003, p. 399). It is practically based rather than theoretical, and the principles of the model appear simple to apply (Connie and Metcalf, 2009). This simplicity is based on the premise that talk on unpacking a problem can make the problem worse and more complicated, but when talk focuses on solutions and what the client wants to accomplish the opposite occurs.

Solution-focused therapy focuses on what clients are doing right rather than on what a client is doing wrong, with the objective of therapy being to find out what works for the client and to promote this (Jong and Berg, 2008). Connie and Metcalf (2009, p. 304) outline the central precepts of solution-focused therapy:

- If it's not broken, don't fix it
- If something is found to be working, do more of it
- If something is found to be not working, do something different
- Small steps can lead to big changes
- The solution is not necessarily related to the problem
- The language for solution development is different from language needed to describe a problem
- No problem happens all the time; there are always exceptions
- The future is creatable

Whilst certain techniques represent the solution-focused model, Elliott Connie (2009) argues that solution-focused therapy is more a way of thinking – being curiosity driven in a process based on the relationship between two people. For clients to be in a position of being experts in their own lives, it is necessary for the therapist to adopt a not-knowing stance and to set aside their own frame of reference so as to explore those of the client. Using solution-

building ‘ears’ enables the therapist to hear the client’s story through the client’s filters, while being able to set aside their own. Certain questioning techniques guide the solution-focused process, yet to be effective the therapist must understand the underpinning tenets of the model and check how these tenets fit with their own values and theoretical beliefs.

Questioning techniques, which are central to effective solution-focused therapy, are framed around a future envisioned without the problem. They are designed to help counsellors encourage clients to be curious about their present situation and their own description of a preferred future. Counsellors need to be persistent with questioning to ensure that during their conversation with the client they allow sufficient opportunity to express enough detail to consider what they want and how they might reach this.

Scaling Questions, which can be used at various times during a counselling session, help the client and the counsellor gauge progress and consider multiple interventions (Connie, 2009). Scaling Questions invite clients to put their predictions, observations and impressions on a scale of 1-10. For example: “On a scale of 1-10 – where 1 means little chance of success and 10 means every chance of success – where would you rate yourself?” Scaling questions can be very versatile and can be used to assist client’s perception on almost anything the client is talking about.<sup>1</sup> Attribution Questions such as Coping Questions can help identify what attributes the client already has and what will be helpful for them in achieving their goals (Connie, 2009). The oft-cited Miracle Question invites the client to imagine how things would be if they were to wake up the following morning to discover that the problem has disappeared (Connie, 2009). Whilst the Miracle Question supports imaginative and creative thinking, the solution-focused Exception Question opens the door to solution talk.

## **2.3 The Exception Question**

Cunanan and McCollum (2006) note that, of all the solution-focused techniques, it is only the Exception Question that is unique to the model and sets it apart from other counselling approaches. As Berg and Dolan (2001) postulate, solution-focused therapy assumes that there are exceptions to all problems however small and infrequent and the therapeutic task is to examine those exceptions so that the client can recognise and repeat this. An Exception Question – “talk to me about a time when this problem was not so bad for you or you handled

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<sup>1</sup> In my study I used a modified version of this Scaling Question to look at the Exception Question (Appendix A).

it in a different way” – can lead into conversations about exception times, which are those experiences in a client’s life when the problem may have been expected to occur but didn’t. This assumption that there are always exceptions gives clients hope, and that hope can be ignited in clients by the therapist’s genuine admiration for their strength and refusal to give up on themselves.

## **2.4 Narrative therapy**

The idea of considering a preferred future without the problem aligns with narrative therapy. Alice Morgan notes that “problems never successfully claim 100% of people’s lives or relationships” (2000, p. 130). As stories develop and unfold through the counselling relationship the exception stories that emerge can support the client to shift their perception of the problem. Like solution-focused therapy, narrative therapy also centres people as the experts in their own lives with the skills, competencies and abilities necessary to assist them change their relationship with problems in their lives (Morgan, 2000). Narrative therapy acknowledges how client’s life stories determine how they act, think, feel and make sense of new experiences. Through the telling and retelling of preferred stories in their lives clients are able to deconstruct the problem saturated talk to more self empowering narratives. This corresponds with solution-focused therapy because it is centres around people’s own stories and works to empower them to change what they want different in their lives.

The narrative technique of externalising the problem, as highlighted by Michael White and David Epston (1990), involves separating the problem from the person, based on the premise that the problem is the problem as opposed to the person being the problem. This gives the client a chance to objectify the problem, even at times to personify it, so it can be viewed and worked on as an external entity. This approach supports and complements solution-focused ways of working as it enables clients to distance themselves from negative stories.

## **2.5 Power and the therapeutic alliance**

This is effective when a strong therapeutic alliance has been established and the client feels their experience is validated in a way that is both respectful and nonjudgmental. Scott Miller (1995, 2000) emphasises the importance of a good working alliance for good therapy outcomes in solution-focused therapy, and encourages counsellors to see the client as solution-seeking. Miller also stresses the importance of getting feedback from the client to achieve this. This practice-based feedback focuses on how they identify with change and

when and how this change has occurred, and is informed by the client's view of the therapeutic relationship. Mark Hubble, Barry Duncan and Scott Miller (1999) developed Outcome Rating Scales (ORS) and Session Rating Scales (SRS) to encourage conversations with clients about the therapeutic alliance and to indicate successful outcomes. These rating scales align with the modified scaling question that I used in my research (Appendix A). Duff and Bedi (2010) also stress the importance of the subtleties of relationship building in the counselling alliance. They emphasise the need for positive regard, but caution practitioners that positive comments made too frequently or inappropriately can be damaging to the development of the therapeutic alliance. They also question whether the alliance is caused by certain counsellor behaviours or the behaviours develop as a result of the alliance.

I am interested in the power dynamics of the therapeutic alliance, and how a constructive therapeutic alliance can be reached through empowering the client. Carlton Duff & Robinder Bedi (2010) define the therapeutic alliance as the client and counsellor's experience of working together in the counselling context. It is imperative that the relationship between the counsellor and the student is nonthreatening and based on mutual respect and trust. This is important because many students are reluctant to talk openly about their problems and have not had opportunities of solving their own problems in the past through accessing their own strengths and successes. Solution-focused therapy centres on the client, and takes a positive perspective of the client, which in itself is empowering. However it is vital that the counsellor consistently considers their impact on the relationship and reflects on the alliance formed and the power balance.

A counsellor cannot empower the client if they do not first look at themselves. For this to occur Manthei (2005) notes that the counsellor's knowledge of themselves is as important as their knowledge of the clients and the counselling techniques they may be using. Manthei takes this further stating that before people consider themselves counsellors they should critically examine their own motivations about helping others and be committed to ongoing personal growth and self analysis. He notes the importance of self-assessment and critical self-reflection. Manthei acknowledges that such an attitude is founded on "cognitive flexibility, curiosity and the ability to tolerate ambiguity" (p. 39). It is important, as a counsellor, to accept that you do not control the counselling exchange; rather Mathei claims you need to be open to the direction the client may be taking you and embrace, with curiosity, the uncertainty that this process may entail. This flexible self-reflective disposition is suited



to working in a busy school setting where counsellors do not have time for in-depth analysis with troubled students but rather seek out brief, pragmatic interventions to help these students find solutions to get through the day. It is vital to be receptive and adaptive and to continually ask yourself: At this moment what is most important for the student?

## **2.6 Working with adolescents**

Solution-focused therapy has been identified as an effective intervention to support adolescents in bringing about change (Milner and Bateman, 2011), as it aims to reactivate young people's problem-solving potential. It can help adolescents begin believing in themselves and empower them to find out what works for them. This change in thinking requires a shift from a problem –orientated view to a solution-focused view, promoting a positive attitude and working to lessen self-blame. It stimulates their thinking, working on naming the changes they desire and unpacking the ways in which they will achieve these changes.

Adolescence is a time of transition from childhood to adulthood and a stage of major growth and development in which there is a great deal of physiological, cognitive, psychological and behavioural change (Metcalf, 2008). Concoran (2002) argues that certain cognitive abilities are needed for younger clients to explore any non-problem times in the past and to apply these constructs to the future (bridging the past and future). Thinking in abstract ways about exception times or evaluating the consequences of behaviour can be difficult for adolescents. She draws attention to the concrete ways in which some teenagers think and the consequent need to adapt solution-focused techniques and the associated language used to meet their developmental needs. This is done by identifying and celebrating exceptions in the counselling session so they are more immediate and concrete. By emphasising words such as 'slightly', 'less often' and 'a little better', things can be viewed from a different angle, and, through re-describing a situation, a different perception can be gained that can motivate a student to change. Conversations around non-problem times and the presence of concrete behaviours rather than the absence of negative behaviours can generate further conversations on exceptions and assist in achieving the client's goals.

I found in my counselling that it could be difficult for students to access exception times when they felt saturated by their problems. They found it difficult to make sense of how they were feeling and to think of ways to improve their situations because they were overwhelmed

and not thinking clearly. I noticed that when I could get alongside students to explore exceptions it was easier to have more positive conversations and to plan achievable goals.

Concoran promotes the use of creativity to help make exceptions more concrete so they can be connected to future situations. This can be done through art, drawing and even a role-play of the identified exception. Creativity is particularly beneficial when working with adolescents because it can help lighten up the negativity that may surround a problem and affords new possibilities for younger clients to reposition themselves in relation to their problems, potentially empowering them (Metcalf, 2008). By incorporating creativity in the session, in whichever ways are deemed appropriate to the situation, can effectively help to strengthen or reconfigure the relationship between the counsellor and client, by opening up new ways of conceiving and describing problems and by promoting light-heartedness, openness and a sense of fun.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology and Method**

### **3.1 Rationale for exploring the Exception Question**

I was interested in exploring the Exception Question and uncovering the skills, abilities, strengths and competencies that students already have and working in a way where students' resources take centre stage. For me, this positive approach is refreshing and uplifting. I know that adolescents often struggle to find their exceptions and I wanted to see whether they might be able to access these. There is a scarcity of research exploring this technique from a client's perspective. This motivated me to look into students' experiences of counselling as this fed back into what I was doing, but also as it gave students a new perspective and agency in the process of analysis or meaning-making – allowing them to reflect on the counselling process and to identify any changes in themselves.

I was interested in their stories and how they experienced creative uses of the Exception Question. This aligns with my personal experience of working with younger children and their families in an early childhood context where being creative with the telling and expression of their life story could bring about positive change and provide hope. I was also curious about what I might learn about myself and my own exceptions.

The method of uncovering and utilising exceptions is conceptually simple, yet its application is challenging because it requires a shift in thinking. As I considered exploring the Exception Question in solution-focused therapy, using a narrative case study methodology, I was aware that I needed to grow my skills in integrating exception-building conversations into my counselling sessions.

I kept a reflective journal throughout my study, which afforded me the space to ponder and respond to my students' and supervisors' feedback, as well as reflect on my counselling practice and the impact the sessions were having on me. I will discuss the role of my reflective journal later in this chapter, as it took shape during my counselling and supervision experiences and is a source of data in itself. One early exception time that I noted in my reflective journal highlighted to me some of the potential in being creative with solution-focused therapy and making exception times more concrete:

## **Reflection 2: “A memorable, early ‘exception time’”**

*Transcribed from a counselling session with a young student:*

“Pressure from family is the biggest problem. I used to get up early and get myself organised for school and bus to school. I’d eat toast for breakfast - toast, butter and marmite – slightly brown and a hot chocolate. (I don’t eat breakfast now). My sister would be hanging out with me and Dad would notice everything’s fine cos we would all be together. When I was young I’d have hot chocolate at Dads. We’d have toast and the family would be together – I had no problem – Being young and careless and wearing unmatching untrendy clothes that all clashed. I was so happy to get up in the morning and do things.”

The conversation centred on an exception time. We also talked about the smells of the toast cooking. The following week in our counselling session we cooked toast together with butter and marmite and washed this down with a hot chocolate, and, as we ate and talked, new goals evolved for the time ahead (Kay’s Reflective Journal, May 15, 2013).

This experience connected with my interest in the solution-focused Exception Question and provided motivation to proceed and learn more. It highlighted for me how my story as a counsellor was shaped and influenced by the stories of the students and by my counselling supervisor with whom I shared and reflected on my cases. I knew that I wanted to adopt and develop techniques and approaches that aligned with my own values, and I felt a narrative methodology looking into the use of the Exception Question would allow me to do this – to put *me* into my research process.

### **3.2 Research Questions**

I devised research questions to help focus my study. My questions encapsulated my interest in the use the Exception Question when working with adolescents, in particular, creative applications of this technique, and also reminded me to view myself as a participant and to think about my own story, the meanings and lessons that evolved out of my counselling experiences.

1. Shift happens? How can the Exception Question in Solution-focused Therapy bring about change for students?
2. How do students in a high school setting experience creative uses of the solution-focused Exception Question?
3. How does its use influence my counselling and my ongoing learning as a counsellor?

### **3.3 Qualitative research and narrative case studies**

Qualitative research involves investigating the “lived reality or constructed meanings” (Mutch, 2005, p.43) of those taking part. It acknowledges the complexity of people’s lives and interactions with others to investigate topics in all their complexity in context (Bogdan and Biklen, 2008). Polkinghorne, (1995) acknowledges that work with stories holds promise in qualitative research to help unravel an incomplete situation. He suggests that stories are drawn together by a plot, the narrative structure used by people to understand and describe the relationship between the events and choices in their lives.

John McLeod (2010) indicates that the aim of narrative case studies in counselling is to tell the story of the experience of counselling and to communicate what it is like to be a participant. The experience of counselling can be told on different levels and McLeod acknowledges that this is successful if it expresses the meaning of therapy for those involved. My interest and previous involvement with stories naturally steered me towards narrative inquiry, using stories to make sense of my new learning as a counsellor. Narrative inquiry acknowledges how humans experience the world through the construction and reconstruction of life stories with the story itself conveying meaning (Jerome Bruner, 1986; Jean Clandinin & Jerry Rosiek, 2007). I was interested in considering shared meanings and interpretations, and making sense of my experiences through conversations and experiences with others.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) highlight the need for description and argument in the telling and retelling of stories. They note that any research cannot tell the whole truth or final truth; but, rather, the retelling produces more meaning and understandings, and hopefully more questions. The possibilities and challenges of using narrative case studies in research – “to think with stories” – are also highlighted by Etherington (2000, p. 16), using herself as a primary instrument: “In telling my story to others I am also telling it to myself – and myself (who is the audience) is being formed in the process of telling” (p.17). Berg and Dolan (2001) argue that analytical processes such as interpretation and reframing are analogous to retelling

and so recreating stories. Seen in this way, the potential for change rests in the capacity for people to retell (rewrite) the stories that make up their lives.

These ideas are quite challenging to consider: there is no getting away from yourself. Using narrative case studies requires honesty and a commitment to the process. Kim Etherington was a mature student when she became a “proper researcher” and she wanted to make her work accessible to students. Likewise I was a mature student when I came to work and research in a different profession. I wanted to write this research in a way that was accessible for other counselling students and counsellors, as well as for the students who had supported my learning along the way. The words of Etherington struck a chord with me and motivated me to find courage, and to embrace and share openly my experiences:

I realised that I was not interested in just any kind of researcher but those like me who have risked using themselves transparently in their research and in their writing. By allowing ourselves to be known and seen by others, we open up the possibility of learning more about our topic and ourselves and in greater depth. (Etherington, 2004 p.25)

My intention therefore was to share the story of my experience of counselling alongside the stories of the participating students. These stories were supported by the reflective conversations I had with my counselling supervisor who agreed to be part of my study. Etherington (2000) draws on methods “grounded in personal rather than theoretical sensitivity, and an assumption that meaning will emerge from a process of personal engagement with the text (‘I waited... I trusted myself’) rather than through any technique of rational dissection of that text” (2000, p.195). Etherington’s explanation resonates with my experiences of the counselling process: you must follow your intuition, but also trust others and learn as you go, trusting that the significance of what you are doing will become apparent through this process of moving forward.

McLeod (2010) points to the lack of narrative case studies of counselling being carried out. He acknowledges the lack of consensus within the counselling profession about what is or is not acceptable in case study research, but asserts that there needs to be more narrative case studies. McKeel (1999) supports this and acknowledges the merit of simple qualitative studies as these sit with the philosophy of solution-focused therapy. I wanted to explore how

things were for clients, allowing students to tell their stories and to reflect on their experience of counselling, and I wanted to present my story of the process. A narrative case study approach allowed me to present these parallel stories; in doing so, I intended to show the ongoing dialogue that occurs between them – the stories of client and counsellor responding to and helping to illuminate each other – and how meaning emerges through reading these stories together.

### **3.4 Ethics**

This study sits within the ethical requirements of the Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee at the University of Canterbury. As a student member of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors I was also guided by the New Zealand Code of Ethics for Counsellors (2002).

It was important that students taking part in the study had another person they could talk to about the study other than myself. As such, my counselling supervisor was invited to be involved in my research study. Participants could talk with him about any concerns they might have had about any sharing of information. My counselling supervisor was also able to support me to obtain informed consent from prospective participants and help me reflect on the ongoing counselling process.

Cultural responsiveness within The New Zealand Code of Ethics for New Zealand acknowledges the principles of Partnership, Protection and Participation for Maori in counselling. I am aware that my perspective is mediated by my own understandings and beliefs, but I was committed to consider a Maori perspective throughout this study. The relationships I built with students, and the environment I created for this to happen, was very important as I considered building trust and reciprocity in relationships (Macfarlane, 2012).

### **3.5 Recruiting Participants**

The plan was to recruit no more than five participants, and the study would involve no more than six counselling sessions for each. It was intended that the participants would be students who had been coming to counselling or beginning counselling when the project began. My counselling supervisor on placement helped me to consider students I might invite to participate, giving consideration to the problems students were presenting with and how being part of the study might impact on their participation in counselling. Students of any age

or year level at school were able to participate with their participation being voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time without jeopardising their access to counselling. Their confidentiality was ensured, using pseudonyms and disguising their identity where relevant to do so. A further condition of the Ethics committee, and also of the school, was that parents were required to give consent to students' participation. The recruitment of students was a difficult process as I will discuss further in the Limitations Chapter.

## **3.6 Data**

### **3.6.1 Student Feedback**

After each counselling session I reflected on the story that had emerged; that is, I wrote my own parallel story of the session. Later, students read their transcribed stories, alongside The Counsellor Story, which describes my experience of that particular session, and gave written and verbal feedback. Students wrote comments on their stories about how things had changed for them or about anything they noticed in themselves, either at the time of the session or now as they reflected back. I did not give the students particular questions to answer or any other specific direction as to what sort of feedback I wanted – because I didn't want to influence or limit their responses. I simply invited them to note down what came into their minds as they read their stories now and thought back to what it was like for them sharing their stories with me.

I also had informal discussions with students to elicit deeper responses and to ensure that I had understood their written comments. These interviews added another dimension to the stories, providing feedback on the student's stories as well as opening up conversations about The Counsellor Stories – my account of and reflections on the counselling sessions. I was always aware of my presence in this exchange and how this might influence their responses, and I tried to avoid asking leading questions such as, "What has changed for you since then?" There are certainly limitations to obtaining and incorporating client feedback as data in such a study. Clients may say things because they suspect that this is what is wanted from them or simply to affirm their counsellor. I believe adolescents may be particularly susceptible to this. I will discuss this further in the Limitations Chapter.

Another limitation of using such verbal feedback – one which needs to be mentioned here – was the fact that I did not video our interviews and therefore struggled at times to remember and transcribe perfectly the particularities of our conversations. Fortunately, their written



responses outlined their feelings about the direction and progress of the sessions, and any feelings they had about the counselling sessions or about me as their counsellor.

I found this process quite enlightening and believe the students also experienced this. With a new perspective students were able to revisit their stories and talk about their counselling sessions. I found that the drawings, as these conceptualised their stories, became a catalyst for conversation about how things were then and how things are now. I found that the students spoke freely about their experiences and enjoyed having the opportunity to do so.

### **3.6.2 Supervisor as Research Participant**

My placement supervisor, Ben Sullivan,<sup>2</sup> is an experienced high-school counsellor and is familiar with solution-focused ways of working and narrative approaches. When I was preparing my ethics application for this study I realised I wanted to have Ben part of my study. Firstly, his involvement meant that participating students had someone, other than me, with whom they could talk.

I wanted to consider my counselling supervisor as a critical friend (Smyth, 1992). His involvement meant that I had someone with whom I could describe what I was doing, unpack why I chose to work in this way and consider ways I might do things differently. Our weekly meetings gave me valuable insights into my research and my counselling role. We could have conversations where I talked about what I was doing or I could share one of the student's drawings with Ben. Ben was very interested in what I was doing and I felt empowered to try out new ways of working. As we spent more time together Ben would add his insights as well.

At a supervision session with Ben on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2013 Ben invited me to consider looking at my counselling work through the lens of the Exception Question. At this time I was finding it difficult dealing with complex issues in my day-to-day counselling. We looked at the template I had modified for my research (Appendix A) and I used this template to think of an exception time of my own in a recent counselling session. This story is one that involves a student who was not part of my study. The openness with which I was able to discuss this with Ben and the trust I had in my relationship with him resulted in the discussion documented below in Figure 1. After this session, as I ordered my notes and considered my

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Sullivan is a pseudonym.

research questions, I developed another template which I used to help me prepare for my future supervision sessions with Ben (Appendix C).

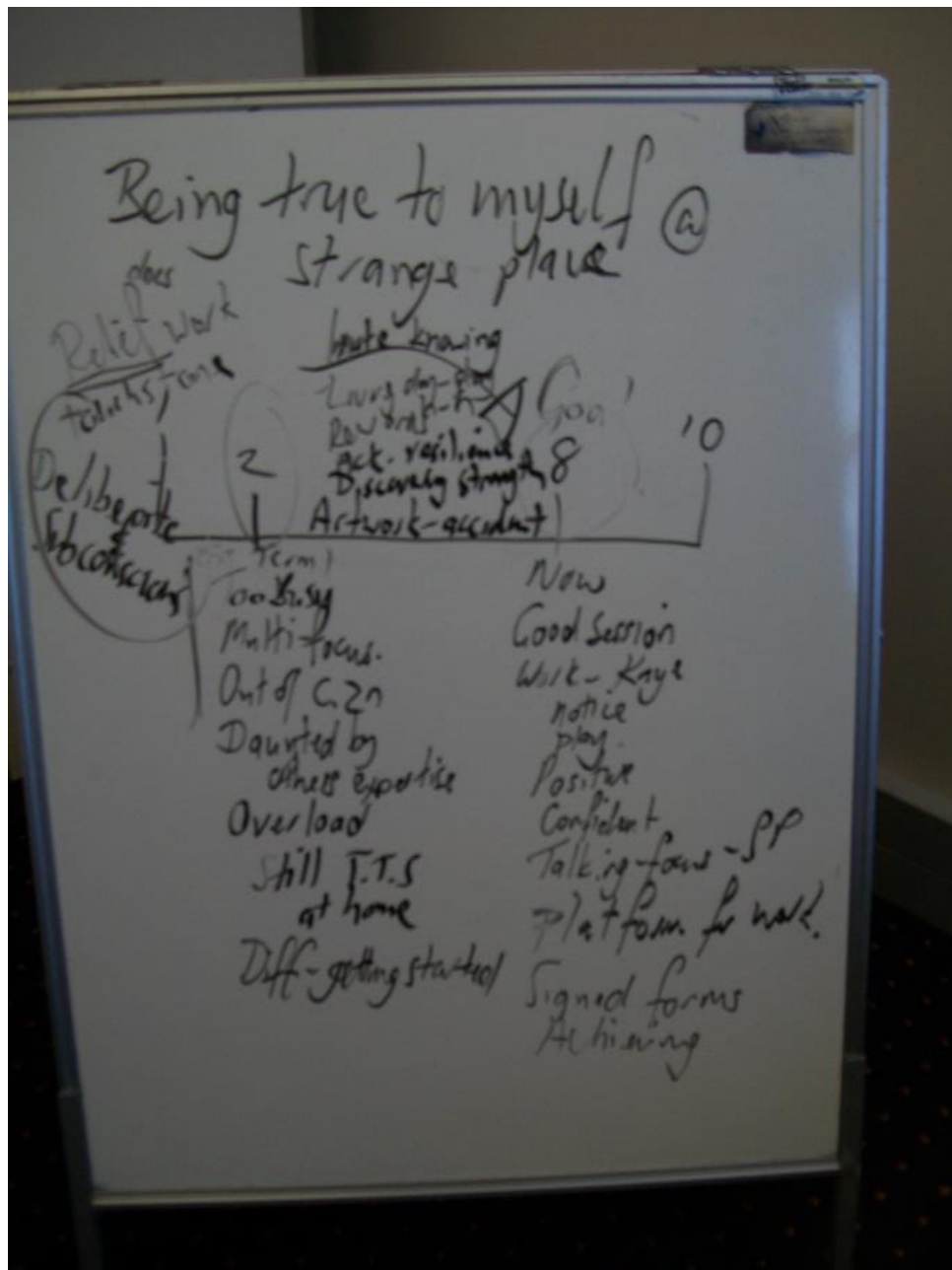


Figure 1: “Being true to myself in a strange place”

As we talked Ben represented the unfolding story on the whiteboard. This session brought my counselling, research and early childhood worlds together using the solution-focused scaling technique and my exception stories.

After our meeting I recorded and reflected on Ben's insights and what they meant to me as I looked ahead. The following notes come directly from my Reflective Journal:

Ben acknowledged how early childhood is my zone – my passion – and I'm finding myself in an area which is the antithesis of this. He acknowledged that all areas have some early childhood aspect in them. Ben talked about my own narrative about finding myself in *my* zone – to locate myself in a place and also within myself and being true to myself – wherever I locate myself. In this high school context driven in terms of data, numbers – the production line – I'm asking where's the *play*? Ben questioned me on what do I do when I'm in a place where I can't *play* as I still seek to discover what's intrinsically true for me and yet part of my exception is to consider how I tap into different meanings.

In this session I discovered ways that I've found my own exceptions when I am in conflict with a situation – while remaining true to the values of the context in which I'm in. I discovered that at these times I access a playful disposition as part of my exception finding to help me stay true to myself and be real.

Ben commented that to do your best work you have to be truly present – and true relationships are the core of good counselling. Ben: "people won't locate you unless you've located yourself". Ben suggested that waking up in this strange place might be my touchstone. – Reflective Journal, July 4 2013

I learnt a lot from working with Ben. I felt buoyed by his energy and enthusiasm, in particular for solution-focused ways of working, and inspired by his knowledge and experience working as a counsellor in a high school. On many occasions we discussed the impact of our working alliance on our personal and professional growth, and Ben explained that he too had found the experience to be of considerable value. Ben agreed to describe this in his own words:

I have been a counsellor for 20 years both in schools and in private practice. Solution-focused Brief Therapy is my primary modality in terms of both training and practice. While drawing on other modalities in my work, I continue to find SFBT a tool of huge value in a wide variety of situations. The integrity it gives clients in

maintaining their own cultural perspectives and understandings in counselling is a real strength.

In SFBT, the Exception Question is a game changer. The opportunity to see someone begin to notice what is working well for them is inevitably creative, and it is not unusual for it to be fun as well.

As Kay Henson has conducted her study whilst on placement with me over this last year, I found myself re-engaging with the individual elements of SFBT, particularly the Exception Question. During a year that has been hard personally with the death of a parent and living in temporary accommodation while EQC repairs are done, I found our weekly supervision sessions a reminder to notice the exceptions in my own life, and then also in my professional practice. The power of noticing was regularly reaffirmed – and appreciated! – Ben Sullivan, 2013

### **3.6.3 Reflective Journal**

The notes I took in my reflective journal informed the ideas and shape of The Counsellor Stories which follow the transcriptions. I jotted down an idea in my journal when it came to me and I talked with Ben about them at our weekly supervision meetings. Sometimes these notes were in response to a counselling session I had just had with a student, other times a book or article I had read, or a conversation with someone or curiosities I had about something. If I was thinking about something and thought there might be merit in remembering that thought, I would jot it down. The notes kept in my journal were very informal and messy because they were often done in a hurry. In preparation to meet with Ben I went through these notes and ordered them in a way that was helpful for me at the time. For this purpose I prepared for these meetings by using a scaling template (Appendix C), developed in the abovementioned supervision session with Ben on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2013. On this template I was able to:

- acknowledge how I scaled myself in relation to “being true to myself in a strange place” which helped keep me aware of my own values and beliefs as I considered my ongoing learning and work as a counsellor and my research questions.
- consider my reflections in relation to my own exceptions.
- consider the input from Ben and how I might do things differently.

As a counsellor you occupy two positions concurrently: you are an insider, intimately involved in the process, but also an outsider, able to look in from another perspective. Barkhuizen and Hacker (2008) describe this relationship between the different positions a counsellor occupies – as participant and inquirer – and they suggest that narrative enables meanings to manifest and evolve over time: through the reflective process of sharing, analysing and interpreting stories, each retelling offers new opportunities to learn.

Keeping a reflective journal helped me to describe and to make sense of this dual space as participant and inquirer, insider and outsider. I was able to revisit stories in my journal and see them differently because I occupied a different headspace, and had temporal and physical distance from them. This reflective practice really helped me to grasp what it meant to occupy this double space and to discover new meanings through revisiting the stories.

Alaszewski (2006) notes that diaries can help to reveal the meaning of something provided we keep in mind the context in which they are written. An insider and outsider, I also moved in and out of different contexts – the contexts that make up my life: familial, social, professional and academic, for instance. My journal afforded me the space to reflect on what was happening with my counselling, my research and the students with whom I worked; but it also allowed me to reflect on what was going on in my personal life and record my thoughts or ideas. Through keeping a journal, I was able to document – in an unrestrained and unmediated way – the complexity of the relationship between different aspects of my life.

Etherington (2004) acknowledges that diaries often have more than just a focus on the research and record aspects of a person's life that is pertinent to the research. My counselling placement was in a high-school setting, but I was also doing some early childhood relief teaching on other days. The different settings in which I found myself challenged my thinking and piqued my interest in exploring exception times and the place for creativity when working with adolescents. My reflective journal became the place where I noted some of these wonderings and became the basis for thinking, planning and putting into action some of my ideas of ways the Exception Question could be used in an early childhood context. Whilst this sits outside the scope of this study it highlights how other things that were going on in my life influenced my thinking and ways of working.

### **3.6.4 Art and Drawing**

I always had drawing and art materials out on the table where I worked with the students. These materials were used to support or re-imagine what we were talking about. Before I began this study I had been using art and drawing in my counselling sessions where and when it seemed to fit, offering creative ways of looking at the Exception Question. I began to notice that art and drawing created a space to externalise the problem and helped to generate more solution building conversations. Sometimes these were conversations centred on exception times. At other times art and drawing offered a space to talk about a shift in the student's perception of the problem – or even to identify what the problem was, as the solution did not necessarily connect with the presenting problem. My curiosity about the potential of art and drawing motivated me to explore further their use.

The idea of considering a focus on solutions through art was accentuated by Mooney (2000) who found that integrating solution-focused therapy with art therapy become another option to help therapeutic conversations move forward. Whilst I am interested to read about applied applications of art therapy, for my study I am more interested in the organic ways in which art and drawing may evolve around exception conversations.

### **3.6.5 Video Recording and Analysis**

Being flexible and open to the direction that the client takes you, and embracing ambiguity (Manthei), means that counselling sessions can take all sorts of turns and that meaning may become clearer over time. There is no capturing what goes on in this private exchange without some way of recording it; so, in order for me to accurately transcribe the stories and to analyse them in depth, I decided to video the sessions.

I first gained written consent from students. I set up the video recorder in such a way that I would be able to view myself and the student. I tried to make the placement of the recorder as nonintrusive as possible, and I told students that at any time they could stop the recording.

As an observer participant in these sessions, I took some time after each session to watch the video and write down anything that I noticed or I did. These participant observations assisted me in gaining greater insights into exception times and how these impacted on my own learning as a student counsellor. I created a template for analysis (Appendix B) that I used as I watched and re-watched the recordings. This template helped me to focus my analytical eye and record, more objectively, what I noticed about different aspects of the sessions. It also

reminded me that I occupy different positions – as student counsellor, high-school counsellor and researcher.

After watching the video recordings of sessions, conversations I had with my counselling supervisor further assisted me to question how I positioned myself at any given time. I was aware of the different positions I occupied; but, first and foremost, I was a counsellor. These observer comments and the conversations I had with my counselling supervisor gave me a chance to stand back from the data (Bogdan and Biklen, 2008) and reflect on the counselling process.

I also invited students to view their sessions because I thought they might be interested and that they might elicit feedback from the students about their sessions. I also wanted them to feel a sense of ownership of their stories as well as control over the recordings.

I was drawn to consider other ways that the data gained through video can be useful and helpful. I was interested in exploring Video Exceptions with the students, which combine solution-focused exceptions with Self Modelling – where students see *themselves* role-modelling appropriate behaviours and strategies for change (Murphy and Davis, 2005). However, this interest is beyond the scope of my study. The core tenet of this way of working is about identifying exceptions and using these to bring about change for the client. The ideas put forward by Murphy and Davis, I believe, offer opportunities to explore the ways in which video can benefit not only the client but also the counsellor.

### **3.7 Narrative analysis**

Narrative analysis creates stories as a way to produce meaning in research. The function of narrative analysis is to answer how and why a particular outcome came about. For my study this happened by combining a succession of counselling sessions (stories) for each of my four participating students alongside my own associated counsellor reflections (stories) on each of these stories to produce a case study – or “storied production” (Polkinghorne, 1995). Robert Polkinghorne (1995) suggests that narrative analysis relates events and actions to one another by arranging them in a way that contributes to the advancement of the story or plot. The story is viewed as a whole rather than broken down into its basic parts. The chapters containing the students’ stories, counsellor stories and the analysis of these individual stories represent an unfolding story, the plot of which is driven by and directed towards my research questions.

The story of the research emerged, constructed out of the complex, interwoven experiences and meanings of those involved. Robert Stake (1995) emphasises that there is no particular moment when data gathering begins, nor is there any particular moment when data analysis begins. He acknowledges that there is “much art and much intuitive processing to the search for meaning” (1995, p.72). As I read and re-read for the purposes of analysing the students’ stories alongside The Counsellor Stories, I found it very helpful to be guided by Etherington (2000) and “an assumption that meaning will emerge from a process of personal engagement with the text” (p.195). I asked questions such as: How did this happen? Why did this come about? What does the literature say? What does my supervisor, with whom I reflect on my counselling, say? These questions guided me for pieces of information that contribute to the construction of a story and the advancement of the plot.

### **3.8 Presenting the Stories**

In the following three chapters I provide an introduction to the student on whose counselling stories the chapter is based.<sup>3</sup> The students wrote these profiles in their words. I then provide a full transcription of the stories. The students read their stories to ensure accuracy and, at this time, they also named their stories.

I have chosen to include the full transcriptions of the stories – each story corresponding with a counselling session. While particular techniques used in my practice may be readily identified – for example: the use of the Exception Question; focusing on the presence rather than the absence of something; the use of scaling questions; checking the student’s goals; discussions about externalising the problem; the use of humour; the incorporation of art and drawing – these techniques are not isolated and inert examples of a particular theory or practice; but rather they unfolded organically, often spontaneously as function of a real, meaningful human interaction. To explain: an Exception Question opened up possibilities for solution-focused comments, while a discussion about externalising the problem suggested possible visual conceptualisations of that problem, and these drawings prompted a lot of laughter. Also, session 1 informed the shape and direction of a subsequent session and so forth. Finally, these techniques, as they underpin my counselling practice, cannot be analysed individually. In some ways, the separate sessions/stories need to be analysed concurrently: to consider how the Exception Question can bring about change, for instance, we must look at

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<sup>3</sup> I have used pseudonyms – chosen by the students – to ensure confidentiality.



the counselling sessions with a particular student over time and in connection with each other.

So, for these reasons, I felt it necessary to include the full transcription of the sessions/stories. I concede that this places certain demands of concentration on the reader and that it may not be immediately apparent what is going on in the exchange. However, I believe that the stories cannot be sliced up and analysed in discrete segments, and I hope readers will keep this at the forefront of their mind as they plough through the words.

The stories are presented in a triadic arrangement. Each story, as it corresponds with a counselling session, is followed by The Counsellor's Story of that session and Analysis against my research questions. The Counsellor's Story describes the story of the counselling experience from my perspective, embedding this experience in the wider contexts of being a student counsellor and researcher. They represent my reflections on particular sessions alongside discussions that unfolded with my placement supervisor; they provide a space for the thoughts and ideas those sessions provoked, and, in this way, chart my ongoing learning as a counsellor. I kept a reflective journal for this purpose and my notes, often messy and meaningful only to me, are incorporated and unpacked in these Counsellor Stories and so made accessible to others.

Naturally my research questions guided my thinking throughout this study, and therefore influence the content and structure of The Counsellor's Stories. However, I later realised that I needed to address these questions more explicitly. The Analysis that follows each story/session needs to be read alongside The Counsellor Story for that session as it aims to explicate and organise my thoughts in line with my research questions.

The stories contain numerous examples of the ways in which solution-focused therapy works, but for the purposes of my study I am focussing specifically on the Exception Question:

1. Shift Happens? How can the Exception Question in Solution-focused therapy bring about change for students?
2. How do students in a high school setting experience creative uses of the solution-focused Exception Question?

3. How does its use influence my counselling and my ongoing learning as a counsellor?

Readers will find different aspects of the counselling sessions interesting and draw different meanings from them. I acknowledge that my reading (analysis) is not an exhaustive one because it responds to three questions, when there are countless others, and comes from *my* experiences. As they engage with the stories, others will ask different questions and find new meanings, and this I welcome. However, my analysis should in some way guide and inform the reader by highlighting techniques and explaining the significance of the sessions (to me) in terms of my research questions.

## Chapter 4: Emily

*I am a Year 10 student who loves music. I live with my Mum and my younger sister. Dad left soon after my granddad died three years ago. I got into music when my granddad got sick. It was hard when he died, it still is now. When my grandfather was around he'd inspire me to go for my potential. Before I came to counselling I was stressed and wasn't happy with life. I'd been having some health issues and had passed out in class a few times. Mum had been worried and I'd been to the doctor. – Emily*

### 4.1 “Chicken Curry”<sup>4</sup> (11 July 2013)

#### 4.1.1 Emily's Story

*Kay*            So what's better?

*Emily*        Chess? I find it amusing chess came to be a sport. It's funny cos at the end at the prize giving (at an interschool sport tournament that Emily had been at) I was in a room with all the top athletes in the school and it's like – ‘how was your game?’ (smiling and giggling)? It doesn't seem like chess should be a sport.

*Kay*            I didn't know you played chess. Do you play chess at home?

*Emily*        I used to play chess with Dad and my granddad. They taught me all the basics and then I started going to a chess club.

*Kay*            Does Mum play chess?

*Emily*        She's the worst player ever (smiling). I can beat her in four moves - but I am getting on with Mum a bit better though – until yesterday when we had an argument about the phone charger. I've noticed its better until around Thursday. She gets crabby around Wednesday and Thursday cos we're all really tired. Mondays and Tuesdays are better and it's been a busy week and we're all tired.

*Kay*            So what's better on a Monday and Tuesday?

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<sup>4</sup> After reading their transcribed stories, the students were invited to name their stories. Emily named her four stories and Larry named her three. My final participants, Julie and Bethany, did not name their stories.

*Emily* We've had the weekend to sleep and we're not so tired and we're more relaxed.

*Kay* So sleep is important for you and it helps you feel more relaxed. It sounds like it might be like this for Mum too.

*Emily* Yes. I have had half an hour's more sleep and that's a bit better. I don't want to oversleep.

*Kay* So what's helping you sleep better?

*Emily* I'm just going to bed earlier and I try to do my work earlier.

*Kay* And you manage to go to sleep ok?

*Emily* Yes.

*Kay* That's good that you are able to go to sleep easily once you get to bed.

*Emily* I guess so.

*Kay* So when you sleep well it helps you get started on the week better?

*Emily* Yes. It's mostly good on Mondays and Tuesdays. There are activities on but it's not too busy.

*Kay* So how do you manage with all the activities you have on?

*Emily* Well my big music assessments were last week. I had to improvise twice. I managed to do it but I could have done it better though. It's intense but it's becoming a lot easier to do now.

*Kay* It sounds like it's something you quite like doing though?

*Emily* Yes. I'm better at the fast jazzy ones. I really like them more. I was more expressive and knew what to do.

*Kay* Did you talk to Mum about how it went?

*Emily*      She doesn't understand. She just nods her head.

*Kay*        So who do you talk to?

*Emily*      My music teacher.

*Kay*        So what would be helpful for us to talk about today?

*Emily*      I don't know. I'm just getting really tired and there's still two more days until the end of term. I've got compositions to learn by Friday and I'm performing tonight at my old school (smiling). We're guest performers – all my group are going.

*Kay*        You do have some long days. When do you fit in meal times?

*Emily*      I'll just have something when I get home. I'm not doing sport training cos it'll be too much work and I have to be all tidy for the performance and with training I'll be all smelly.

*Kay*        You don't want to be smelly for your performance do you (smiling)?

*Emily*      No (smiling). I'll get all dressed up. Mum will take me and stay. She'll say 'you sound really good'.

*Kay*        I guess it must be hard giving feedback when you're not so musical yourself. That must be difficult for Mum to do?

*Emily*      It was like in assembly a few weeks ago and people were saying 'you sound really good'. They didn't notice the things I mucked up with. No one knew about that.

*Kay*        So it's a busy end to the week?

*Emily*      Yes. On Saturday I've got some mates coming over for a mini chess competition.

*Kay*        So you've been asking some friends around home. So that's a bit different?

*Emily*      Yes.

*Kay*           How did that come about?

*Emily*       I've become friends with students from other schools who play chess. I like to learn their strategies and it improves me as a chess player.

*Kay*           So you go to each other's homes. That's a bit of a change for you. Are you looking forward to having friends around home – I recall you've talked before about wanting to hang out with friends a bit more before. When was the last time you had friend around?

*Emily*       Like months ago.

*Kay*           So it's good having friends around home?

*Emily*       Hmmm. Not sure.

*Kay*           But you mention things are better at home with Mum.

*Emily*       I emptied out the dishwasher. I got home before Mum so I emptied it out and I watched TV for a bit and then she got home and she didn't notice the dishwasher.

*Kay*           She didn't know it was emptied. You're smiling. What's that about?

*Emily*       I told her afterwards and she said 'good job'.

*Kay*           So when Mum said 'good job' what was that like for you?

*Emily*       It was ok – yeah.

*Kay*           You've mentioned in the past about needing to be 'generous' at home. Was that being generous?

*Emily*       Yes. But I want to get a car – so I can go to the supermarket and not have to walk.

*Kay*           So that will help you being more generous when you have a car?

*Emily*       It would be great.

*Kay*           How far away is that happening?

*Emily*       Two years. I don't drive yet but I know the basics. Whenever I go to Auckland I learn a little bit about cars. I kinda know what different parts of the car do.

*Kay*           So a car would make things easier – but that's a wee way off. You mentioned your tiredness when I asked earlier about what would be helpful to talk about today. I recall the conversation we had when Mum joined us for a session and you'd been to see the doctor about your iron levels. How's that now?

*Emily*       I haven't been back yet. I feel a bit better though. I'm in charge of myself – and it's not to do with anyone else.

*Kay*           What things are you doing that tell you that you are in charge of you?

*Emily*       I control my body. I should be able to control my emotions.

*Kay*           So what is it you are doing now that's different to before?

*Emily*       I'm eating more. Mentally I've kinda strengthened out a bit. I was kinda giving up before, but now I'm coming back. I still get overwhelmed – but I'm way less overwhelmed.

*Kay*           And you've been talking with Mum about these things?

*Emily*       Hmm. A bit maybe.

*Kay*           How's Mum's pressures?

*Emily*       She gets stressed – cos her job and yeah – Dad – and yeah...

*Kay*           So when Mum's under pressure what's that like for you?

*Emily*       It's not nice cos she's crabby.

*Kay*           If she wasn't crabby what would she be instead?

*Emily* She's be more relaxed... I've got plans over the holidays to busk and... (stops talking) ... my eyes have gone all funny. I can see white lines everywhere...

*Kay* Can I get you a glass of water?

*Emily* Yes that would be nice.

*Kay* (after pause while Emily has a small drink) Are you ok now?

*Emily* Yes. I felt dizzy in class the other day and had to go to sick bay. It helped – but I don't like missing class though – but I knew I wasn't able to concentrate in class.

*Kay* It was good that you did something to look after yourself. What other things are you doing to look after yourself?

*Emily* This morning I wanted potatoes for breakfast but I couldn't find one. I'd bake it in the microwave for 5 minutes and then eat it plain or with tomato and cheese on it. I'd like that – but we didn't have any potatoes. Instead I had a blueberry muffin and a banana.

*Kay* So having good healthy food is important for you. So have you had a talk with Mum about what you would like in the supermarket trolley?

*Emily* Yes. And I want to busk over the holidays – I want to save some money but I'll buy some of my own groceries and have my names on them – potatoes, almonds and my favourite jazz apples – they remind me of music (lots of laughter). I also like them because they're not spongy but crunchy. I'll put my name on them and anyone who wants them will have to ask.

*Kay* So they'd negotiate with you – any sharing of your groceries in the fridge?

*Emily* Yes. And I'll just eat my groceries for a bit for however long they last (giggling)!

*Kay* Does Mum know about this plan?

*Emily* No (laughing). I'll just turn up home one week and have all these groceries.



*Kay*        So when I see you after the holidays I can check what you did (laughing)

*Emily*      I might go to KMart and get boxes that I can put a lock on (smiling)

*Kay*        So what would Mum be saying?

*Emily*      Mum would be angry. There'd be like my food and her food and she'd want my food. I'd want a clear box so they can see – and it's like 'I've got these groceries'.

*Kay*        So it's a bit of a tease?

*Emily*      Yes. She'd get really angry though.

*Kay*        I notice you're smiling when you talk though. Would she see your humour?

*Emily*      She'd still get annoyed – but it would be fun – and if I gave her some of the food she'd be fine. She'd say you could have spent the money on other things. The food would be different to the food she buys.

*Kay*        So that's quite important to you. The food you eat – and you want to earn some money so you can buy the food you want?

*Emily*      Yes. Sometimes I get my own lunches. I don't like a sandwich when it's coated in butter.

*Kay*        I'm just checking – so when you eat well it helps you with all the things you are doing – and when you're eating well it helps you feel relaxed because you've got more energy. So what else helps you?

*Emily*      Music helps me

*Kay*        What else?

*Emily*      Having space would help me.

*Kay*        In your ideal space what would be happening around you?

*Emily*      Well – I'd have my own saxophone – and I'd save up for one.

*Kay*        What else?

*Emily*      I'd be happy.

*Kay*        So when you're happy what are you doing?

*Emily*      I'm getting my own groceries – and it's not stressful.

*Kay*        If it's not stressful what would it be like?

*Emily*      It would be relaxing – but not too relaxing.

*Kay*        So relaxing – but not too relaxing?

*Emily*      Yes.

*Kay*        Can you think of a time when it's been like that?

Emily draws the picture below in Figure 2 as she talks

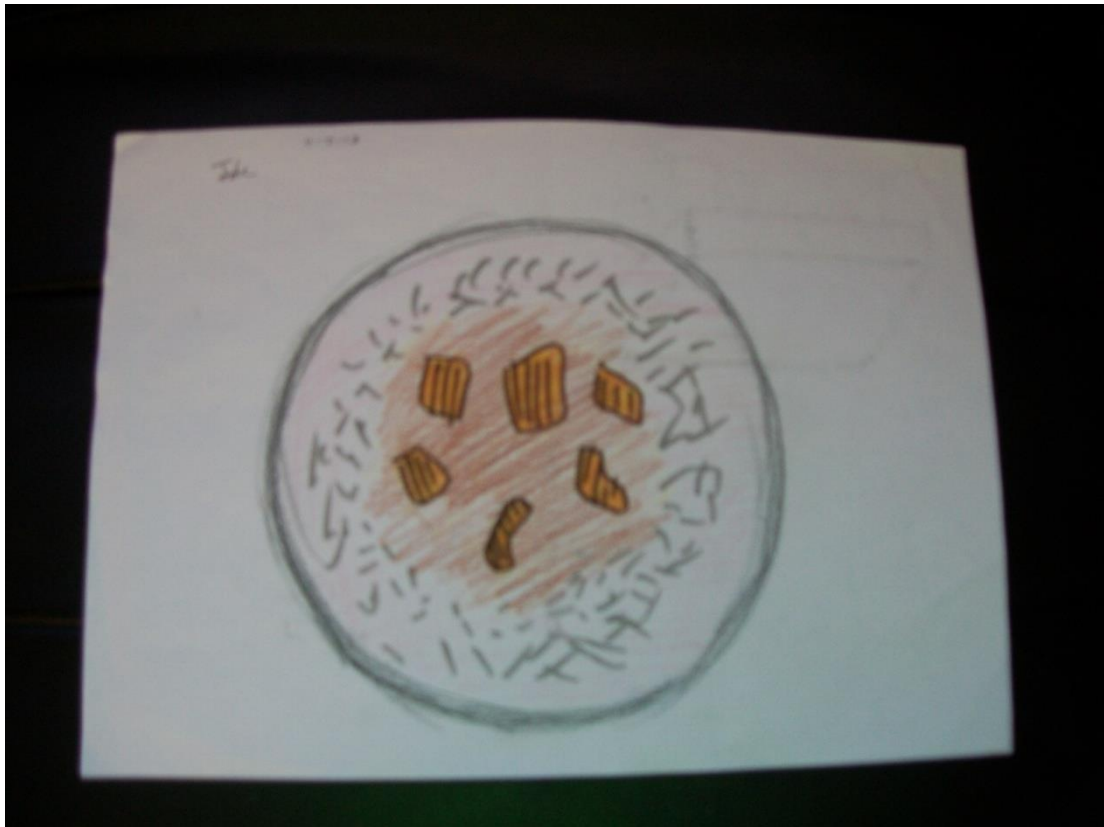


Figure 2: “Chicken Curry”

*Emily* When I’m eating chicken curry – and chocolate – but maybe not chocolate. Well I kinda get lost in the food. When people talk to me I don’t really hear them. Oh yeah! She [Emily’s Mum] says something about how much I love the chicken curry and I don’t hear what she says. It’s the only food she makes that I really like. When I smell the curry I get excited. I’m in my room or at the table. I don’t want to make a mess. It should only go in my mouth. My granddad used to cook them. GrandDad used to always have a spicy one – I used to have a mild one. He was just eating it and I wanted to try it too. I used to be the food taster when he’d cook. We had our own little games. The games we’d play were based on Tom and Jerry. Where’s your broccoli gone? Maybe Jerry’s eaten it. We’d better call Tom and I’d go to the phone and pretend to dial. Tom, Tom come back here. Jerry’s here and he’s eaten my broccoli. It did get me to eat all my vegetables. I found that game really fun. Just me and my granddad. Mum would be sitting there rolling her eyes

*Kay* Is that something you want more of?

- Emily* Yes. I've kinda got a little bit too serious.
- Kay* I've noticed other times when you talk about your granddad you smile a lot – you sound playful. Is it helpful to think about being playful?
- Emily* Yes – I just don't want to lose my game. I don't want other people to catch up and pass me and I'll lose other opportunities.
- Kay* So has representing your story though drawing been helpful.
- Emily* Yes – but drawing is not my serious side.
- Kay* But might it be helpful to think more about the relationship between your serious side and your playful side?
- Emily* Could be.

As a homework task from this session Emily was asked to notice times when she was serious and times she was playful and to notice things that were going on around her at these times.

On the written feedback sheet modified for my study (Exception Feedback – Appendix A) Emily scaled her response to the conversation about “cooking chicken curry with granddad and had space and was happy and relaxed” at an 8/10. Emily's written comments on the feedback sheet:

It was helpful to think about times where I did have space and was relaxed. Bringing to my realisation that I could be like this most of the time. Now I have a craving for chicken curry. It's also nice to have someone to talk to. It woke me up. Helps me to find energy. It gave me a huge energy boost and made me feel more confident in myself knowing there is more energy there.

#### **4.1.2 The Counsellor's Story**

As outlined in the previous chapter, The Counsellor's Story tells the story of the counselling experience from my perspective. It provides a space for the thoughts and ideas that the session provoked, alongside my meditations on discussions that unfolded with my placement

supervisor. In this way The Counsellor Story charts my experience and learning as a counsellor.

In this session an animated Emily talked about an exception time, focusing on chicken curry and the special relationship she had with her now-deceased grandfather. Emily's session really highlighted to me aspects of solution-focused therapy that I am drawn to. Watching the video of this session, I noticed and felt a shift in energy in myself and Emily when positive conversations took place, such as the initial conversation about chess. This was also evident in the imaginative and animated way Emily talked about the games played while eating chicken curry and her plan of buying her own groceries and storing them in locked, clear containers in the fridge which would bemuse and tempt her family.

I became aware of how much I am drawn to stories and how these can give far more detail to the context of what's going on. I noticed that following the lead of the student took a number of twists and turns. I realised how challenging it was for me to stay focused on the student's goals, while still following their lead and embracing their stories. In her feedback Emily said that the exception conversation about chicken curry had given her a huge energy boost and made her feel more confident in herself knowing there is more energy there. I suspect that this might be the same for me. I went into this session feeling apprehensive – it was my first video session – and within a few minutes I was captivated by Emily's stories.

I had had a supervision session the previous evening (not with my placement supervisor) where I went over a brief video clip of a different counselling session. During this supervision, I was acutely aware of an unhealthy power dynamic in the room. Thinking back to this session, I do not feel like my supervisor respected or applied solution-focused ways of working. I felt disempowered by the experience and left questioning whether what I was doing had value. Following this session, I found it too difficult to look at any videos objectively, consumed as I was by feelings of my own inadequacy.

As an early childhood practitioner, I find myself in a strange place. I want to stay true to myself but at that moment I felt like I had to change who I was. Later in my session with Ben I talked this over. I talked about how the session with Emily had impacted on me at a time when I was questioning my role as a counsellor. Ben mentioned that in my supervision with him I am not there to be “another Ben” or anybody else but “Kay as a counsellor”. Ben put it

to me to consider being grateful for the gift of supervision and to consider suspending what had happened in that supervision session. I came out of this conversation with the goal of looking at the video again with someone new, drawing out different aspects. I eventually did this with a new supervisor. This experience highlighted for me the importance of having a safe and trusting therapeutic alliance, regardless of which side of this alliance I sit.

### **4.1.3 Analysis**

I realised the need to address my research questions more explicitly. The Analysis that follows each story/session needs to be read alongside The Counsellor Story for that session as it aims to explicate and organise my thoughts in line with my research questions without compromising the honesty or lessening the significance of my earlier reflections.

After writing up Emily's story and my own story of the counselling experience, I asked Emily to read these stories to check for accuracy and to comment on things she noticed about herself as she re-read the story and to think about anything that might have changed. Emily responded: "It gave me butterflies and made me smile. I can be happy if I notice the good things in life—like eating chicken curry or just eating in general. At that counselling session things were improving in my life and I had more energy and I used it in a positive way. I realised things I hadn't noticed before by Kay asking questions and I liked drawing the picture of the chicken curry. I've also shown my playful side more and how it helps me to be more energetic".

Emily's feedback speaks directly to my first research question, demonstrating how the Exception Question can help to make change for students. Emily's words give her account of how small steps can lead to significant changes (Connie and Metcalf, 2009): "It gave me butterflies and made me smile. I can be happy if I notice the good things in life – like eating chicken curry or just eating in general. I realised things I hadn't noticed before by Kay asking questions". This feedback shows a shift in Emily's perception of her problem as she noticed and identified positive things that helped her move forward. This example of feedback from Emily demonstrates the importance of getting feedback from the client and the importance of a good working alliance for good therapy outcomes, as stressed by Miller (1995, 2000).

The drawing of chicken curry (Figure 2) – as this represented her exception – combined with the rich, descriptive language Emily used when discussing it, exemplifies a creative

application of the Exception Question. The creative use of drawing to enhance the Exception Question was uplifting and enlightening to me, suggesting the creative potential of solution-focused therapy (Concoran, 2002). This relates to my third research question and how my use of the Exception Question influences my counselling and my ongoing learning as a counsellor.

Whilst my study focuses on the use of the Exception Question, during the process of transcribing the story, I was able to identify many solution-focused techniques and this highlighted for me the way the techniques work together. This made a relatively labour-intensive process valuable in terms of helping me to reflect on the counselling session and the story that emerged, and to unpack my thoughts in relation to my research questions. Manthei notes that the counsellor's knowledge of themselves is as important as the techniques they use and stresses the importance of critical self-assessment and getting feedback from the client. My counsellor story showcases the importance of reflection and being able to discuss this with openness in a trusting relationship with someone else.

## **4.2 “After the holidays” (30 July 2013)**

### **4.2.1 Emily's Story**

*Kay*           What's better?

*Emily*       Well my relationship with my sister got better over the holidays. I picked her up from the holiday programme a few times. We played soccer, (laughing) and just getting along better. It's just so peaceful - and now I'm her friend and her big sister.

*Kay*           So what's changed?

*Emily*       Well there's less conflict.

*Kay*           So when there's less conflict what's there instead?

*Emily*       Well it's peaceful.

*Kay*           That's a change in story then.

*Emily* Like usually... and now we don't argue about the TV.

*Kay* So it's good that you're having nice conversations with your sister and you're getting on better.

*Emily* Definitely. Sometimes my sister complains that she's putting on weight yet she eats really unhealthy food. Then my Mum comes along and says that if she's worried about her weight then she should eat more healthy food. Then they argue and I watch TV smirking. Yes. This isn't me anymore.

*Kay* It's helpful that you're not in the middle?

*Emily* Yes.

*Kay* Would Mum notice anything different with you?

*Emily* I wouldn't be as tired or as drained out. I'd be happier and not as tired. I've got more energy. Since the holidays I've been in a really happy mood. She's still tired - but I'm happier though and I don't complain back. There's no conflict. I just do what she says. I even managed to do homework on the bus and I looked for positives.

*Kay* How did you do that?

*Emily* With skill!!! ( smiles)

Here Emily was looking at a drawing from an earlier counselling session which was on the table Figure 3. On the occasion this picture was drawn the flowers coming out of the saxophone represented an exception story and a mix in life at the time "of being robotic or relaxed and free in life."

*Emily* I like that picture. That was fun drawing.





Figure 3: “A Change for Pressure and Responsibility”

*Kay* Would there be anything different on that picture?

*Emily* Those two (Pressure – indicated by “B” in Figure 3 – and Responsibility – indicated by “A” in Figure 3 – would be far away.

*Kay* Is it helpful having Pressure this smaller size? On a scale of 1-10 where was Pressure that day (pointing to earlier drawing).

*Emily* An 8 or a 9.

*Kay* And what would it be today?

*Emily* It's like a 1.

*Kay* Wow! So it sounds like Pressure is a lot more of your friend and helps you get things done but isn't too big to overwhelm you.

*Emily* Yes. It's a little sad that it's so far away.

*Kay* Would you like to draw them?

*Emily* Yes. I can draw them. (Emily drew as the story unfolded). I need some pressure for music but I'm kinda calm cos I practiced over the holidays. They (Pressure – D in Figure 3 – and Responsibility – C in Figure 3) are in the distance – but they're not close enough to annoy me or distract me. Well, it's good to have some (pressure) if you don't have any you don't have anything to push you. Sometimes it's good to have some. I work better under pressure unless it's like too much. In school I get work done three times faster than usual with a little push. The pressure wants to be bigger though.

*Kay* So the pressure wants to be bigger? So what's stopping it?

*Emily* Me. I'm not worrying about it. I'm ignoring it. I'm just relaxing. There's a glass wall. It can see me but I can't see it and it can't get very close.

*Kay* So the things that keep pressure at that size is you – and for you to be relaxed.

*Emily* Yes. I'm not over thinking.

*Kay* So now you're not over thinking

*Emily* Yes. It's just about thinking little steps and not thinking too far into the future.

*Kay* So it's little steps. So what's helped you not to think too far into the future?

*Emily* Why should I worry about something that's so far away. I've got time. I should think about the present time instead of later on.

*Kay* And the things that help you stay in the present time?

*Emily*      Family. Life. (pause) The clouds looked really pretty yesterday (smiling). At lunch time they looked really cool. At 4 o'clock they looked really good too – they were kinda wiggly ... and then patches of clouds.

*Kay*        So this is different?

*Emily*      A while back I probably would have looked at the ground.

*Kay*        So now you look up and you notice the sky. I also notice that you are smiling a lot.

*Emily*      Yes and even Responsibility (referring to the drawing again) would be at a 1. I've still got responsibility but it's not getting to me.

*Kay*        So how are you coping?

*Emily*      I thought everything was such a big deal – but I just relax and everything would be little. I think that's really important.

*Kay*        So things are not such a big deal if you relax and stay in the present time without over thinking into the future too much.

*Emily*      Yes.

*Kay*        I wonder what your granddad would say if he was here?

*Emily*      He would be annoyed with my Dad but happy with how I'm looking and how I'm feeling. He would be happier that (Pressure and Responsibility) are getting smaller but he'd be annoyed that they got so big.

*Kay*        Would he comment on your smile and your laughter?

*Emily*      Yes (giggle). He'd probably like my smile. Cos if there was a piece of broccoli in there – he'd play along and then I'd crawl along before him and pretend to call the cat.

*Kay*        So it sounds like things are better at the start of a term than at the end of a term.

- Emily* Yip. So what do you think will help you to have these continue throughout the term?
- Emily* Sleeping more, organisation, packing my bag, getting ready for school before the actual day and having more home stuff up to date – and not putting it all off.
- Kay* So when you do those things what else is happening?
- Emily* Mum's happier – she doesn't worry about me – I'm becoming more independent.
- Kay* So if you were talking to pressure and responsibility?
- Emily* They have to look up to me. I look down on them.
- Kay* So they've become more of your friend? So when they look up to you what do they see?
- Emily* Well I'm stronger, stronger mind – I'm a happier person. Scarier I guess.
- Kay* Scarier?
- Emily* Scarier to them. (Pressure and Responsibility).
- Kay* So now you're holding your own and standing up to them.
- Emily* Yes
- Kay* So what's been helpful looking at the different relationship you now have with Pressure and Responsibility?
- Emily* I'm more relaxed and awake.
- Kay* So what might be helpful as you think about the week ahead?

In the feedback in the session Emily commented on the drawing: I really like this picture. I really like that flower – it's really pretty.

*Kay* Would you like to take that picture with you?

*Emily* No. I'm happy it stays here

*Kay* Is that the first time you have had a flower growing out of your saxophone? (referring to drawing). The day you drew that picture there was a lot of pressure for you – but you still managed to be creative and draw a flower coming out of your saxophone.

*Emily* Yes. That's hope!

*Kay* It's great to have hope?

*Emily* Yes.

*Kay* Is it helpful to revisit your drawings or to have conversations?

*Emily* I like the conversations and it made me realise that before I knew my Pressure I didn't realise what it was like for me. Drawing the picture made me see it now they are smaller and what I really think about them – and it's helpful seeing it like that (in the drawing)

On the written feedback sheet (Exception Feedback – Appendix A) Emily scaled her response to the exception time when she talked about “Pressure and Responsibility being small in comparison to before” at a 9/10. Emily's comments on the feedback sheet:

This showed me that the (holiday) break really helped me. I had time to think about me as a person – what I want and how I'll accomplish it. I learnt that being strong focused and organised on my goal – my worries would become smaller until they were at the back of my mind. Feelings and emotions are controlled by genes and environment but mainly by me. Thinking positive makes you happier. I'm feeling great!

#### **4.2.2 The Counsellor's Story**

Emily had come into this session eating an apple – and her eating of it lasted for most of the session. She commented at the start of the session that she had begun to eat the apple at a meeting she had just attended. We had a playful conversation about her love of apples and making the eating of them last. I noticed that it took a long time to eat an apple when you were talking. Applied to this session such a reflection might indicate that Emily was doing more of the talking, and I the listening.

I was aware of how last week's "Chicken Curry" session had impacted on me. Emily's creativity and imagination reminded me how these are the things I have always valued in my work with young children and their families, but how I was struggling to indulge these in a high-school setting. In my session with Ben on the day of the counselling session, among other things, we talked of solution-focused therapy and my early childhood background. We talked of the place for playfulness and creativity in counselling. Ben shared with me his discovery of solution-focused therapy: "It was like unwrapping gifts to find toys inside. When different people hold them you get different outcomes. We explore with toys. We use our imaginations to discover what is real. Tools have rules. Toys are different". This session culminated with Ben imploring me to "Risk Learning – Go for it!"

I am now able, months later, to look at these video recordings and not be consumed by feelings of negativity. As I write this, I realise how difficult it had been to be open and honest about the difficulties I had experienced looking at the videos, knowing I had to write about them as part of this study. I had also been finding it hard to own up to my negative feelings when I have such a commitment to the positivity of solution-focused therapy.

In this session with Emily I feel that we carved out a space to be creative and spontaneous together. Emily's feedback demonstrated her awareness that thinking positively makes you happier and, by being strong and focused on her goals, her worries would become smaller. "When I focus on the positives, life's better and that relaxing helps the pressure go down. I'm more tired since then but the pressure is small. I found it sad how scary you found videoing. I think it's great how you faced your fear." These might be things for me to consider too.

### **4.2.3 Analysis**

Emily's own words in the counselling session best describe how the Exception Question can bring about change for her: "it's just about thinking little steps and not thinking too much into

the future ... I thought everything was such big deal – but I just relax and everything would be little. I think that’s really important”. This response was given by Emily as she looked at her drawing in Figure 3 and responded to the additions she made to this during the counselling session.

As I consider how the Exception Question can bring about change for students and on their experience of a creative application of this technique, I am always also meditating over a response to my third research question – how this affects me and what I can learn from it. I asked Emily: “Is it helpful to revisit your drawings or to have conversations”? Emily responded, “I like the conversation and it made me realise that before I knew my Pressure I didn’t realise what it was like for me. Drawing the picture made me see it now they are smaller and what I really think about them. It’s helpful seeing them like that”. Emily scaled her response to this exception story at a 9/10 – and it gave her a chance to see what she wanted and how she can accomplish it. This corresponds with the literature (Jong and Berg 2008) that the objective of therapy is to find out what works for the client and to promote this; and it shows me the relevance of revisiting previous stories and their visual representations.

Revisiting her drawings saw an important shift for Emily as she experienced a sense of hope; she then registered this positive experience in her reflections after the session. As she looked at her drawing, I asked the solution-focused coping statement: “The day you drew that picture there was a lot of pressure for you, but you still managed to be creative and draw a flower coming out of your saxophone”. Emily was able to acknowledge that the flower represented hope. O’Connell (2005) identifies empowerment, self-esteem and hope as important constructs as counsellors establish a partnership with clients to help them establish what they want different in their lives. Moreover, Berg and Dolan (2001) point out that the assumption that there are always exceptions gives clients hope, and that hope can be ignited in clients by the therapist’s genuine admiration for their strength and refusal to give up on themselves.

In terms of third research question – How does the use of the Exception Question influence my counselling and my ongoing learning as a counsellor? – The Counsellor Story of this session highlights my understanding of the importance of being a reflective practitioner and of being open and honest about the challenges involved as a trainee counsellor and as a researcher. This awareness resonates with Manthei’s argument that the counsellor’s

knowledge of themselves is as important as their knowledge of the clients and the counselling techniques they may be using. It also follows the ideas of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) who claim that the retelling of stories produces more meaning and understanding and hopefully more questions. I realise that the more I read and reread these stories the more I can get out of them – and the more I can discover about myself.

This Counsellor Story represents a significant development in my learning as a counsellor: on the one hand it revealed my vulnerabilities; on the other, it helped me to move forward and, following the advice of Ben, to “risk learning – go for it”. My resolve to keep exploring creative ways of using the Exception Question in my counselling corresponds with this attitudinal shift.

### **4.3 “Tiredness” (8 August 2013)**

#### **4.3.1 Emily’s Story**

This counselling session began with a conversation about Emily’s weekend trip away.

*Kay*           What was the highlight?

*Emily*       Playing on the stage and going to Kapiti to have ice cream ... pistachio flavour!  
... I’m really tired after being away.

*Kay*           What are you doing to help yourself cope with all these things going on?

*Emily*       The Treaty!!

*Kay*           You’ve mentioned the treaty before that you made up in class. How does this help you?

*Emily*       Well for homework we had to write a treaty for members of the family. I give something and receive something in return. I did mine with groceries. I requested \$15 out of the grocery money to pick what I want.

*Kay*           You often talk about wanting to eat healthy food



*Emily* I'd have food I liked and they would have food they liked. Everyone in the house would be happy. If they didn't like the food they bought then another person in the family who likes that food can have it.

*Kay* So you said you have to offer something in your treaty?

*Emily* Yes. Empty the dishwasher every two days. I changed the conditions in my treaty.

*Kay* So Mum doesn't know that you changed things.

*Emily* Mum only read the first paragraph. She didn't read all the conditions.

*Kay* So you imposed conditions

*Emily* Yes. I'm supposed to empty the dishwasher every day.

*Kay* You said your sister signed it too.

*Emily* She doesn't really have a signature and she kinda signed it and then she came into me to say 'what does it say'.

*Kay* So neither Mum nor your sister really knew what they were signing?

*Emily* No

*Kay* How useful was it to do this exercise at home?

*Emily* Well maybe I'll ask Mum for \$15 for groceries when we go to the supermarket – and I can buy my own food.

*Kay* Just checking... is it still a goal to get through the term with energy.

*Emily* Yes

*Kay* What helps you do that?

*Emily* Organisation – getting ready the night before. Sometimes I make lunch – I beat Mum to it. My lunches are looking nicer –when I pack my lunch. There’s apples and bananas. I like sandwiches but I don’t like just ham – I like them filled with tomato, lettuce and stuff. The lettuces aren’t very nice at the supermarket at the moment.

*Kay* So it’s helpful to be well organised and to eat well

*Emily* I have more energy when I eat better.

*Kay* When you have more energy what’s different at home?

*Emily* I can help Mum more. She’s happier.

*Kay* And when Mum’s happier?

*Emily* It’s peaceful. Mum was tired today and crabby. She wants me to cut back and I don’t want to. She wants me to choose between music and sport but I want to do both. Music’s a big part of my life but I need exercise. If I don’t stay fit I’ll get more tired. Mum wants me to choose but I don’t want to.

*Kay* It also sounds like Mum’s busy and tired too. You say that you need exercise. How does keeping fit benefit you?

*Emily* I don’t get as tired. I have more energy. My muscles are using less oxygen and when I’m walking around it’s a lot easier.

*Kay* Is it a bit like keeping the machine called Emily running?

*Emily* Yes.

*Kay* If you were to look up on the internet for a picture that represents this Emily Machine what would the picture be?

*Emily* It would be bright and awake. A puppy. (smiling). They’re happy and bright and they can run around for ages not getting tired.

*Kay* Is the puppy playful?

*Emily* Sometimes

*Kay* So where's the place for playfulness with all the things you do. I recall you mentioning that spending more time with your friends was something you wanted to do more of?

*Emily* I haven't had much time lately. I got to know other people while I was away. I made some new friends but we don't have time to hang out much... and we're planning a paintball trip.

*Kay* Is that good to be thinking of doing something social.

*Emily* Yes. I get to shoot lots of people! (smiles)

*Kay* So it's keeping this little puppy happy and running around and not getting tired. So what has worked in the past?

*Emily* Sleep. Food. Keeping calm. They all work for me.

*Kay* Can you think of a time when you have slept, eaten well and kept calm?

*Emily* A week ago! I was really relaxed. I had nothing to worry about. So calm. I'm more awake and it's nice.

Kay points to Emily's picture that is on the table (Figure 3, Story 2)

*Kay* How would that picture look today?

*Emily* I don't feel pressured. I just feel tired.

*Kay* What would be different in this picture? Would you want to put tired on it?

*Emily* The pictures looking a bit full. Can I use these? (pointing to a container of coloured foam stickers). Tired can look a bit like a bird.

*Kay* Yes you can use these things (pointing to other art and drawing things on the table) they're just waiting for someone to be creative with them and to see what happens.

*Kay* Is the tiredness always something that's been with you?

*Emily* There was a time when I wasn't tired all the time. I don't really remember why. I remember when I was in year seven I wasn't that tired.

*Kay* So what would have been different in year seven?

*Emily* I still did lots of things – music and netball. I don't play netball now. Everything was easier. I wasn't as tired. Less time getting to places. The earthquakes had an impact. My granddad was still around. Granddad died three years and two days ago. Sometimes I remember. Sometimes I forget. Mum reminds me. We have curry (on his anniversary). We didn't have curry last week cos we couldn't afford it.

*Kay* Spending time with granddad has been something special for you – and eating curry together.

*Emily* Yes. It was a thing we did together

Emily returns to her drawing.

*Kay* So what's Tired doing there?

*Emily* Just sitting there trying to move forward. Tired is walking and kinda creeping up. It doesn't know where it's going. It can go either way. It could be like a bat. .. I could put two on. One for sleep and one for doing too much - tired of doing too much and tired of thinking too much.

(The picture on the top of the page is "Tired" (indicated by E on Figure 3) from doing and thinking too much. The picture at the bottom of the page is sleep).

*Kay* What would you rather have instead?

*Emily* Rest – or keep flying. The one at the bottom is a Walking Zombie (indicated by F on Figure 3) and not enough sleep. They sometimes rest together... sometimes rest puts on more pressure to get things done. I don't really feel like I'm doing too much at the moment. I just need more sleep.

*Kay* Which one would be the helpful one for you to think about?

*Emily* The Walking Zombie and not getting enough sleep.

*Kay* Would the Walking Zombie talk to you?

*Kay* He'd want me to sleep. I would become more alive by sleeping... I'm just daydreaming a bit.

*Kay* How is this helpful for you to do this? (drawing and art)

*Emily* My imagination. The realisation that pressure needs to be smaller. The Walking Zombie would be suggesting sleep, and to eat more – and I would try.

Now there is a short session break in the counselling session so we can both provide feedback, suggestions and any homework tasks. In the feedback after this break:

*Emily* Sleep, eat more, exercise - small steps and not too much thinking

*Kay* Notice times in the week that these things happen and also notice what else is going on at the time

On the written feedback sheet (Exception Feedback – Appendix A) Emily scaled her response to the conversation about being less tired in Year 7 at an 8/10. Emily's comments on the feedback sheet: "Well I know that if I've handled everything before that I could handle again".

### **4.3.2 The Counsellor's Story**

As I reflected on this session, I was aware of the questions I still had for Emily. I wanted to ask her: How helpful is it for you to represent your story through art and drawing in our counselling sessions? What has been less satisfactory? In the feedback after the session break

Emily suggested that The Walking Zombie would suggest that she needed to “sleep and to eat more”. And she said that she would try. But, while she could identify things that she needed to do, I wondered how genuine and strong her desire was for change, and I realised that I had not asked this basic question – and perhaps I needed to.

I was not using the conventional Session Rating Scale (CSRS) at the end of the sessions. I decided not to use this form (CSRS) as Emily was completing the modified one for my research purposes and I thought that this would be adequate. I realised though that there is a place to get more general feedback on the effectiveness of counselling sessions and the questions I had for Emily following this session highlight this.

I also reflected on my wonderings about the creativity in these sessions. I recalled how I am drawn to Emily’s drawings and how these helped to externalise the problem. These drawings provided a space to have conversations about very important things – in a light-hearted way that does not detract from the seriousness of the issue. I thought about Emily’s relationship with Pressure and Responsibility and how these are represented in her drawings and how there has been a shift in her perception of these. The size of these is now smaller and her awareness of the relationship she has with them is much greater. The drawing of the Walking Zombie in today’s session also highlighted how you can have different conversations with a problem when it is externalised and named. This was further evidenced with Emily identifying the machine – that is herself – as ‘a puppy’, which would be “bright and awake and can run around for ages without getting tired”. This conversation became much more light-hearted through this medium.

Later in supervision with Ben we talked about my session with Emily and my early childhood work and my love of stories. I talked about the kindergarten relief teaching I am currently doing and how my love of personal stories guides me in the way I work with children. Through this conversation I realised I know how to listen and ask questions. I listen with my eyes and with my heart and with a peripheral view of the child in multiple contexts. This capacity for listening in this way is something that I can also apply in a new setting, and Ben helped to remind me of this.

Ben commented on my vision and my plan and the way I have gone from one point to another, and how I naturally put “Kay” into everything I do. Intuitively, I foster playfulness

and imagination in my work with students. Ben encouraged me “think of my life as an artist would – not as a technician” and to be true to myself. He also emphasised that, while “it’s never enough” – there is always more I could do – what I do do is “sufficient”.

### **4.3.3 Analysis**

Emily’s words during the counselling session speak directly to my first Research Question as to how the Exception Question can bring about change for students. By identifying small exceptions Emily was able to give herself a homework task of “sleep, eat more, exercise – small steps and not too much thinking”. Berg and Dolan (2001) emphasise how effective it is to examine exceptions so that the client can recognise and repeat them.

Emily’s feedback after reading her transcribed story gives a clear illustration of how important it is to get client feedback and affording clients opportunities to reflect on their own work. It gives them a chance to uncover the skills, abilities, strengths and competencies that they already have and bring these to the fore. Emily commented: “Life is tiring but I need to be organised and sleep more – that helps me a lot”. When asked if anything was different, Emily responded: “I sleep more now and when I have more energy I am more helpful at home and more responsible”. This resonates with Berg and Dolan’s emphasis on the recognising and repeating exceptions.

In this session Emily’s experience of a creative application of the Exception Question began by looking at her drawing from her counselling session the previous week. Revisiting the drawing led into an exception conversation: “I still did lots of things – music and netball. Everything was easier. Less time getting to places. I wasn’t as tired”. On this occasion Emily’s exception story, as it developed through looking at her drawing, led to some important self-revelations:

I don’t play netball now. The earthquakes had an impact. My granddad was still around. Granddad died three years and two days ago. Sometimes I remember. Sometimes I forget. Mum reminds me. We have curry (on his anniversary). We didn’t have curry last week cos we couldn’t afford it.

Berg and Steiner (2003) note the importance of focusing on the everyday life of clients and how they function with family, friends, teachers and others. Emily added more detail to her

exception story, revealing more about her family life and how she functions with it. By having the drawings as a prompt or a memory in their own right Emily was able to acknowledge in her feedback at the end of the session: “Well I know that if I’ve handled everything before I could handle it again”. As I remarked in The Counsellor Story of this session, Emily’s perception of Pressure and Responsibility has changed. As her drawing reveals, these have less impact on her now – they are smaller in her drawing – and her understanding of her relationship with these forces has grown.

This story certainly influenced by counselling and ongoing learning, as my reflection and conversations with my supervisor helped me to discover. Ben’s encouraged me to “think of my life as an artist would – not as a technician and to be true to myself”. This story reminded me of the importance of looking at my own exceptions, as well as those of my clients. When I (re)view my third research question through this lens and I look at my own exception times I am aware of the ways in which I foster playfulness and imagination in my work with students. Concoran (2002) suggests how beneficial creativity is when working with adolescents as it helps to lighten up the negativity that may surround a problem and provides new possibilities by promoting light-heartedness, openness and a sense of fun. This is something I have experienced and it is something I intend to explore further.

#### **4.4 “Bob” (11 September 2013)**

##### **4.4.1 Emily’s Story**

*Kay* I hear you had the day off school yesterday.

*Emily* Yes. I was so tired that I couldn’t get out of bed – so I studied. I had the house to myself. It was peaceful. I like it. I can do what I want.

*Kay* You often come in here saying you are tired. I’ve been looking at the videos of our counselling sessions together. I remember another day when you came in here saying you were tired and then you started talking about chicken curry and the Tom and Jerry game. On that day you were talking about playing fun games with granddad and you said – ‘I kinda got a bit too serious’ and then you said ‘ but I don’t want to lose my game. I don’t want people to catch up and pass me. I don’t want to lose my opportunities. I’m wondering what that’s all about?



*Emily* (Smiling while Kay talks about the above stories). My competitive side. I'm not wanting to lose. I'm not wanting people to go above me and me having to chase people in front.

*Kay* Has that always been like that?

*Emily* I find when I'm on top of everything it's a lot easier. I can relax and everything's made easier.

*Kay* I'm intrigued because when you talked about that game (of Tom and Jerry with the chicken curry) you talked about it for ages – and then got into other playful conversations about the treaty and buying your own food containers and finding a way to hide them in the fridge. So you seem to like getting playful in your conversations. Do you enjoy being creative?

*Emily* Yes. The other day I made up a story about Zombies and how they're just playing a game but as soon as the human gets bitten they go all serious. I've got a "Walking Zombie" in my picture (referring to picture on table from last time Figure 3). I feel lighter today because I had the day off and I got to sleep in.

*Kay* So you say you've got this serious side and I see a bubbly side when you talk about times when things are better. You can be talking very seriously and immediately you go into this incredible conversation about chicken curry. Is it ok that we talk about this?

*Emily* (smiling) Yes

*Kay* How is this helpful for you?

*Emily* It brings back great memories. It lightens me up a bit- and makes me feel less argh!

*Kay* Is that something you'd like more of?

*Emily* Hmmmm. I don't feel as heavy and tired. It just lightens me up and that side comes out – and I'm not so tired.

*Kay*            So that helps you feel not so tired

*Emily*        Yes. And I feel much more relaxed and loose (smiling and shrugging shoulders up and down)

*Kay*            Were you always aware of that?

*Emily*        No. I just realise now

*Kay*            I notice when I look through the videos and you talk about being tired and then all of a sudden you say something playful and it certainly changes the way you look – and you get really creative in what you are saying too.

*Emily*        I find being playful loosens off all the tension and then I feel more relaxed about what's coming up next and what I need to do to prepare for it.

*Kay*            Does that mean that the playful side can sit alongside the serious side with you?

*Emily*        I can just see (laughing) 'Don't touch me' (mimicking serious and playful competing with each other)

*Kay*            I'm interested to see what this looks like

Emily picks up paper and pens and begins to draw Figure 4 below.

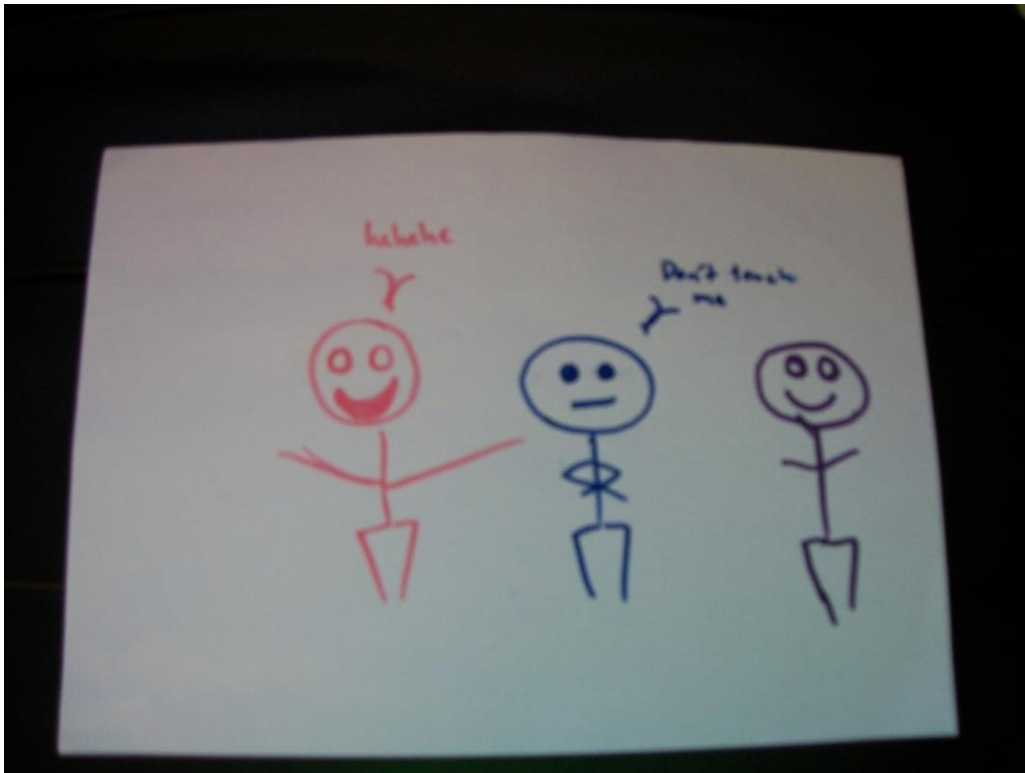


Figure 4: “Playful, Serious and Balanced”

*Emily* Playful is going ‘he he he’ and has got really long arms. Serious is going ‘don’t touch me’. I’ve got an image in my head that imagines Serious and Playful together –and Serious is very serious and Playful is waving his arms around – ‘Let’s play a game. Let’s play a game’.

*Kay* How is this helpful to think of this with exams coming up?

*Emily* Maybe they need to combine a bit. So it’s a combined one – a bit more balanced.

*Kay* So what’s happening when they’re combined like that?

*Emily* Still playful but not out of control. Like there’s a serious side. If I can get that balance it would be good. It’s a bit of both. Serious and playful.

*Kay* So serious and playful are the goal. So you put lots of work in and you need to be serious and you say a bit of pressure helps that. And the reward is to acknowledge all your hard work and be playful?

- Emily* Yes. And be organised. Last night I did some extra cleaning. And I had my bed perfectly made and I got my kilt all ready and I knew where my top was.
- Kay* So does that mean that you're getting more organised?
- Emily* Yes. I also cleaned a window with an old toothbrush. I found it while I was cleaning out the drawers. Mum came in while I was cleaning the shower and she said it looks good. The shower was dirty so I began by cleaning that and as I started I saw more things to tidy
- Kay* And Mum noticed... and when Mum noticed what happened
- Emily* She was happy. She was also happy because I found some hair stuff and she used that and she said 'oh my god you found all these? She was happy that I'd found things that could be of use – she has a meeting today that is very big for her.
- Kay* So that made it nice for her too.
- Emily* Yes
- Kay* You have mentioned in an earlier counselling session that a goal was to be more generous (counselling session June 25<sup>th</sup> 2013) – so were you being generous yesterday by doing the cleaning and tidying?
- Emily* Yes. Every now and then I have this high when I just want to clean – and other times I just want to study. It happens maybe once a month. It doesn't happen often. I like that feeling. I wished it happened more often. My sister even noticed. When I need to get things done I'm quite serious. I think if I'm too serious I'll get stressed and I end up breaking but if there's a bit of serious I can get things done ok and I can focus. If I have the playful side of me it's more relaxing and I still get it done – so it's a bit of a balance.
- Kay* So if you were drawing something today to help you what would it be?
- Emily* (As she draws – see Figure 5 below) It would be a bit of Pressure but if it's too much it just freaks me out. (Silence as Emily continues to draw).

*Kay* Tell me about your drawing? Does your picture have a name?

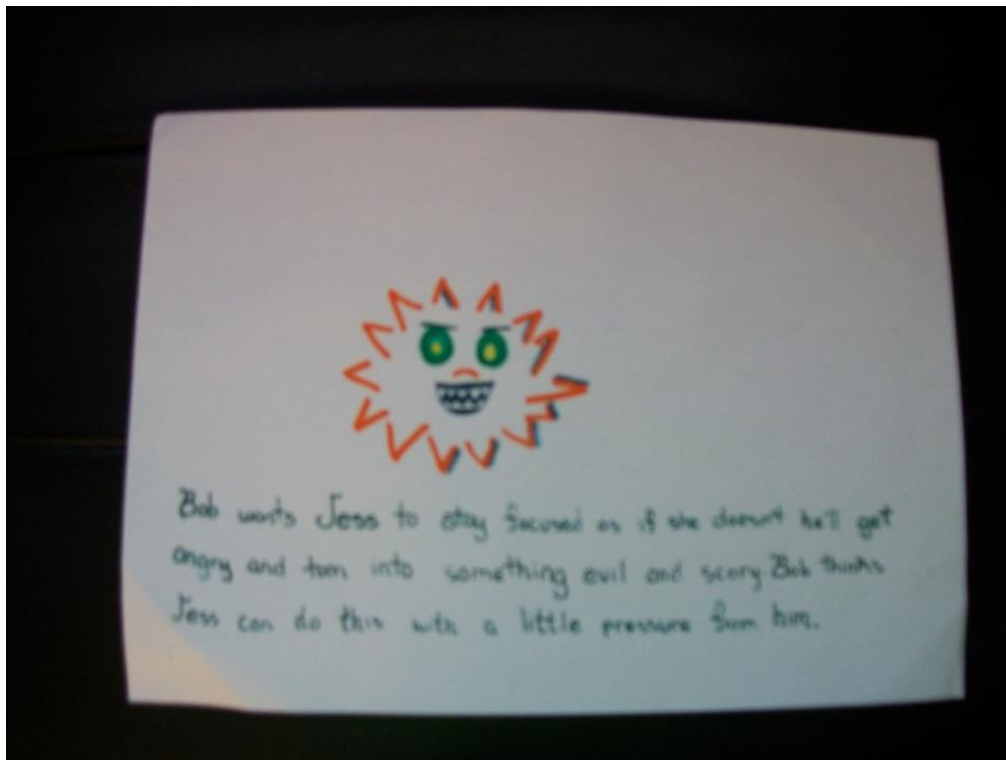


Figure 5: "Bob"

*Emily* Bob! He's got teeth so can be dangerous. Bob is pressure and sometimes he has a friendly face. Bob wants Emily to stay focused and if she doesn't he'll get angry and turn into something evil and scary. Bob thinks Emily can do this with a little pressure from him. Bob gives me the pressure to stay focused – I'm focused by planning and being organised. They go together and it helps me in my relationships.

*Kay* Your story of Bob shows creativity and playfulness as well as a serious side

*Emily* Yes. You know I used to draw heaps with granddad. He used to write letters to his love and I'd send drawings.

*Kay* That sounds like a very special time. So does your drawing of Bob help you think about the week ahead and things that can help you with that.

Emily      Yes. It's a bit of a balance I need – not too serious – a bit of playfulness and a bit of pressure to help me too.

On the written feedback sheet (Exception Feedback - Appendix A) Emily scaled her response to the conversation about being focused at a 7/10. Emily's comments on the feedback sheet: "Coming into exams I need to stay focused but still include the playful side of me as well as my serious side".

#### **4.4.2 The Counsellor's Story**

Before this session with Emily I had spent a lot of time watching the videos of our counselling sessions. I realised it was really difficult for me to look at the whole picture. I wanted to break the watching of the video into parts to enable me to see more detail. As I watched the video, focusing on different aspects – looking only at the client's responses, for example – I noticed things that I had not been aware of in the session.

I was aware that I was viewing the videos through the lens of my values and beliefs, and that I was discovering things about myself through this process. However, the most important person in this video was Emily; and, by having conversations about the video with somebody else, I was able to have a broader view, seeing my own values and beliefs next to those of my supervisor, all the while recognising the importance of hers. In response to this, I developed a template to assist me in analysing the videos (Appendix B).

In supervision with Ben we discussed the session with Emily and finding ways to look at the videos that were helpful and valuable to both Emily and to my research. Ben commented that seeing the video in parts helps us see it more completely and that I would only notice what I was capable of noticing. Ben then shared a story he remembered about eating a sausage:

When you eat a sausage you don't even think about it. You just eat a sausage.  
When I was a child I read a story about a boy who was a refugee who was given a sausage. He had never seen, touched, smelled nor eaten a sausage before and he took a long time embracing all his senses savouring every bite as he ate the sausage slowly. Ever since then I can appreciate a different relationship with eating a sausage and to savour the experience. I still remember the story and knowing what the parts are and to savour them.

Ben commented on the importance of noticing and savouring the different parts – and transitioning from a sense of doing to a sense of being. Ben then related this story to our conversation about watching the video. I recalled in the counselling session that Emily was talking about the relationship between Serious and Playful. I wondered what the interplay of flavours is like for her as she notices and balances these in her life.

Ben also referred to ‘savouring the moment in Supervision’, reminding me to think about myself as a vital participant on both sides of the counselling exchange. He referred to an email he had shared with a student about supervision and viewing it as ‘super vision’ and how this lens can help us recognise our blind spots. To stop and think of myself in this relationship involves a consideration of my values and beliefs, as well as acceptance and exploration of my blind spots. In order to do this it is imperative that I am in a trusting relationship with my supervisor.

#### **4.4.3 Analysis**

Emily’s feedback after reading her transcribed story demonstrates how the Exception Question can bring about change for students. After reading “Bob” and The Counsellor’s Story, Emily commented:

When I drew that picture to find a way to combine Playful and Serious I realised it was not one or the other because I need a bit of both. Too serious is boring and too playful misses opportunities and people won’t take you seriously. I could see this more clearly through doing the drawing. I could see Playful and Serious as people. I’m a lot more balanced now. I can study longer and I’m feeling playful and finding study fun. I’m listening to jazz and sometimes doing my homework while I’m listening. I do it faster when I’m listening to jazz. This [counselling] has helped me to grow – to find myself. My intensity showed in the drawings. I can see the Saxophone [represented in Figure 3] is Hope and me becoming a stronger person. The flowers are Hope as well – they are blooming. There is a darker side showing all the responsibility of stress and pressure and the tiredness of feeling a walking zombie. When I look at the pictures though, they can help me find a way to resolve a problem and to think of ways to make it less of a problem in my life.

This response exemplifies practice-based feedback, which focuses on how clients identify with change and when and how this change has occurred (Miller, 1995, 2000). Emily's drawings enabled her to revisit her story and to take the lead in accessing and talking about her own exceptions.

Solution-focused therapy has its focus on the present rather than the past and revisiting stories can be seen to be looking at the past. However, this story aligns with the ideas promoted in Narrative therapy where the client's life stories determine how they act, think, feel and make sense of new experiences (Morgan, 2000). Through telling and retelling stories clients are able to free themselves of problem-saturated talk and adopt more empowering narratives.

Concoran (2002) acknowledges how it can be difficult for adolescents to think in abstract ways and, on this occasion, Emily's drawing allowed her to concretise, describe and celebrate her exceptions. Emily could identify what was helpful and what she needed to do, and is already doing, to bring about change for her. As her self-awareness increased, her perception of her problem shifted. Her drawing of Bob (Figure 5) facilitated this change in perception: "the drawing helped me see more clearly".

The function of Emily's drawing, as it helped her to externalise, view and review her problem, suggests creative applications of the Exception Question, and Emily's explanation of her drawing gives voice to her experience of this creative activity:

Bob! He's got teeth so he can be dangerous. Bob is pressure and sometimes he has a friendly face. Bob wants Emily to stay focused and if she doesn't he'll get angry and turn into something evil and scary. Bob thinks Emily can do this with a little pressure from him. Bob gives me the pressure to stay focused – I'm focused by planning and being organised. They go together and it helps me in my relationships.

The drawing and the light-hearted conversation this supported allowed Emily to perceive her problem in a different way and enabled her to reposition herself in relation to her problem.

My own learning as a counsellor was exemplified in The Counsellor Story of this session. Discussing how I viewed the video recordings, I recognised that my values and beliefs informed my perception. Manthei (1997) argues that it is imperative that counsellors



critically examine their own motivations about helping others and are committed to ongoing personal growth and self analysis. The input from Ben was incredibly valuable at this time. Ben commented that I would only notice what I was capable of noticing, and he stressed the importance of noticing and savouring the different parts, as well as noticing my blind spots. This disposition of self-reflection is noted by Manthei as being founded on “cognitive flexibility, curiosity and the ability to tolerate ambiguity”.

The stages or layers of transcribing, re-reading, reflecting and analysing Emily’s four stories, alongside my counsellor stories and Emily’s feedback reveal much about how the use of the Exception Question can bring about change for students and how digressions, such as sharing a joke or anecdote, or creative activities such as drawing or role-play can help augment these positive changes by helping the student to see their problems in new ways and to celebrate their exceptions.

Thinking now about my final research question: the stories of Emily had a huge impact on me and reading them again (and again) evokes strong feelings. I reflect on the way Emily’s stories captivated me and the shift of energy that occurred for both of us when conversations took more playful turns. I am reminded of the reciprocal nature of all exchanges and how conversations can shift people’s energy.

The stories also helped me to recognise how we – counsellors, clients, all of us – see things in different parts and from different perspectives resulting in a multiplicity of possible meanings. I can draw a parallel here with the experience of viewing the recordings: re-viewing them several times, each time through a different lens, helped me see new things. This process made me think about the values and beliefs I have and how these inform my practice.

The story of “Bob” helped me to see myself on both sides of the counselling exchange, as counsellor working with a student and as a student working with a supervisor. This story, and the dual perspective it gave me as I reflected on the session, underscored for me the importance of trust in the therapeutic alliance.

Emily's stories also register the interplay of opposing feelings – seriousness and playfulness for Emily; confidence and vulnerability for me. I frequently find myself reflecting on the precarious relationship between these contrasting feelings, and how both vulnerability and confidence are elemental to my work as a counsellor.

## Chapter 5: Larry

*I'm a Year 9 student who loves finding out stuff on the internet. I also like talking to my friend over the internet when I can't get to see her very often. I'm the second youngest in my family and have an older half sister and half brother, cats and a dog. Sometimes I can find it hard to do things and following my own ideas. I came to counselling because I was having friendship issues and I didn't know what to do about it. I don't talk about my problems at home. – Larry*

### 5.1 “Backbone” (11 September 2013)

#### 5.1.1 Larry's Story

*Kay* What would be helpful for us to talk about today?

*Larry* Friends. My friends take advantage of me and I give in to people. I'm not sure what to do. I want to change it. I've got one friend at the moment who has taken some money from me. She asks for money and she's rude.

*Kay* (Scaling this conversation with Larry about this specific friendship). On the scale, Larry indicated 1 where 'the friendship is about taking money, rude comments and back talking'. At a 10 on the scale Larry identified the friendship would be 'peaceful, no worries, no stress, feeling content and happy with self'. Larry rated herself currently at a 5 on the scale with 'both ends mished together – but more of the bad things'.

*Kay* What needs to happen so you can move from a 5?

*Larry* I need to grow backbone to move from a 5. I'm more confident with backbone and I'd be able to talk up more. When I'm more confident I'm not scared around other people.

*Kay* So if you're not scared what would you be doing that was different?

*Larry* I'd be more relaxed and maybe having fun.

*Kay* When you were having fun what would you be doing?

*Larry* I'd just be able to be relaxed around my friends and doing stuff with them rather than worrying about what they think of me all the time.

*Kay* So if you could grow 'Backbone' you'd be more confident and these things would happen?

*Larry* Yes.

*Kay* I wonder what your backbone might look like? (Inviting Larry to draw a picture of what represents this for her)

Larry drew the representation of her backbone, in Figure 6.

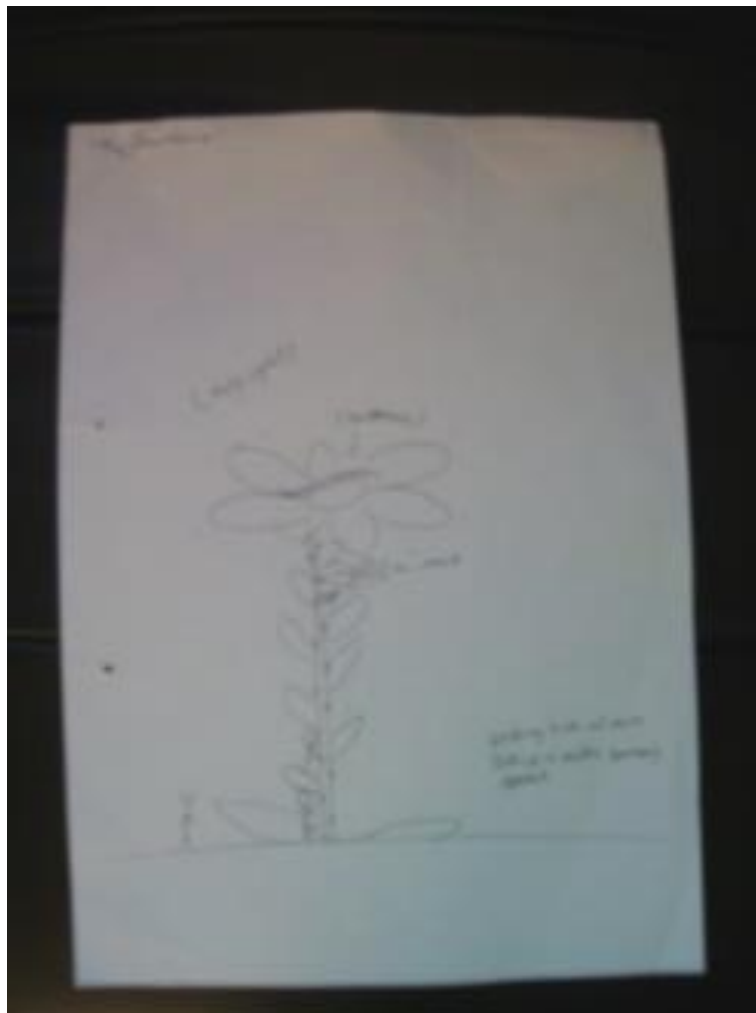


Figure 6: "Backbone"

*Larry* It's kinda like a flower. The backbone is at the top. I'm at the bottom. I am much more confident with backbone and it would be nice to do this. There is grass and a flower and the backbone is resting in the light. Holy light surround it. It's precious. My backbone is confidence. I don't want it to break.

*Kay* That's a great description you've got. Is it helpful to see your story in the drawing?

*Larry* Yip. It shows me what I need to do and what I want to do.

*Kay* Can you think of a time when you had backbone and you were more confident.

*Larry* Before I was ten. Maybe eight or younger. I was the most confident person in the world. When I was eight I always went trick-or- treating. Everyone thought I was happy but bratty. I'd take candy. I was so calm – I didn't need to hide away.

*Kay* Is that something you want more of?

*Larry* Yes. Not wanting to hide away and to be fun and confident.

*Kay* So if you were to look at your drawing where do you think you are now and where do you think you could move to. It seems like it might be a long way to the top, but I'm wondering what might be the first small steps you might take to move up towards your backbone.

*Larry* I'm at the start of the flower. My backbone is at the top. Talking and socialising will help for the start of the plan.

In the counselling session we took a session break so Larry could think of some suggestions of things that might help her with talking and socialising.

*Larry* In the feedback from this break, Larry gave suggestions that it would be good to think about joining a sports club, but her short term goals were to talk to classmates and teachers and to go outside and say hello to people.

At the end of this session Larry did not complete the modified feedback sheet for my study as she was not at the time part of my study.

### **5.1.2 The Counsellor's Story**

Larry consented to be a participant in my study on the September 16<sup>th</sup> 2013. This counselling session was before that date; but, because it was a session, on a day with other counselling sessions, where I really started to notice how effective drawing and art can be to represent a student's story, I asked Larry if I could incorporate her story as part of my study. This counselling session with Larry took place an hour after a counselling session with Emily (see 4.4 "Bob"). The session with Emily had highlighted to me the effectiveness of externalising the problem through drawing and how animated the conversations can become with the externalised problem. It also exposed the playful, fun side of solution-focused therapy.

The telling of an imaginative, creative story about a time when things weren't so bad highlighted to me how important it is to value and honour the gift of the story. As Larry drew her picture she became very descriptive in her language and animated in what she had to say. The drawing also enabled her to identify what she needed to do to shift, using small steps. Solution-focused therapy informs me that if it is working, do more of it and that "small steps can lead to big changes" (Connie and Metcalf, 2009, p304).

In the past, as I have watched other people using solution-focused therapy, it has appeared so refreshingly simple. However, its possibilities have become more apparent to me as I have explored using it in my counselling. One of the goals of my research was to explore the creative applications of solution-focused therapy. I have found it difficult to explore possible applications while trying to consolidate the questioning techniques that underpin this modality. It is important to me that I keep working at exploring exception times and making these more concrete for younger students in counselling, while accepting that this is not always easy to do. The session with Larry highlighted to me the simplicity of the solution-focused model, and I started to feel my way with it rather than over-think what I was doing.

### **5.1.3 Analysis**

Larry highlighted how the solution-focused Exception Question can bring about change when she identified an exception time and the stepping stones she would need to take to incorporate aspects of that exception into her current life: "Before I was ten I was the most confident

person in the world...everyone thought I was happy but bratty... I was so calm... I didn't need to hide away". Larry articulated her goal: "to be fun and confident". She then identified steps she might take to reach that goal: identifying that "joining a sports club" would be a good thing to think about, but that an earlier step might be "to talk to classmates and teachers and to go outside and say hello to people". Larry's ideas, as she worked through the steps towards change, demonstrate the power of the Exception Question to open up solution talk and suggest strategies or steps that a client may not otherwise think of.

Larry's experience of the creative use of the Exception Question evolved through the drawing of her Backbone (Figure 6) and the descriptive language she used to tell her story. After reading her "Backbone" story and The Counsellor's Story for that session, Larry commented:

I noticed that when I drew the picture of my backbone that it was something that I could easily talk about – and when I find something hard to explain I can draw a picture to make it easier for me and for the listener. I also realised that what I need, in order to change the problem I have with friendships, is to grow confidence so I can speak up.

Larry's creativity is evident in both the story and the drawing: "its kinda like a flower. The backbone is at the top. I'm at the bottom. I am much more confident with backbone... it's precious. My backbone is confidence. I don't want to break it". The drawing gave Larry something concrete to look at, which helped to stimulate her thinking and her words. Larry could see her Backbone which she wanted to grow and she could talk about this through objectifying and personifying it. Michael White and David Epston (1990) acknowledge the effectiveness of externalising the problem in this way as it can distance the client from their negative stories. When asked for her comments on the counsellor story Larry commented: "I totally agree with the drawing thing. It helps so much. And yes, yes, yes - the small steps that I need to make changes - slow and steady is the way to go".

In terms of my third Research Question – the influence of this experience on my counselling and on my ongoing learning – Larry's creativity highlighted to me how important it is to value and honour the gift of the story. As Larry drew she became very descriptive in her language and animated in what she had to say. I was certainly beginning to recognise the effectiveness of conceptualising a problem visually. Berg and Steiner (2003) highlight the

non-verbal ways children communicate, and how they use their bodies and expressions, their imaginations and creativity, to communicate when they cannot do so verbally. For Larry, drawing represented an unthreatening and unrestricted way of expressing herself, which in turn helped her to find the words to talk about her problem and to find possible solutions.

My session with Larry highlighted for me the playful, fun side of solution-focused therapy and, as I noted in my earlier reflections on the session, it encouraged me to feel my way with the techniques rather than over-think them, and to embrace opportunities for creativity.

## **5.2 “My speech” (September 17, 2013)**

### **5.2.1 Larry’s Story**

*Kay*           What’s better?

*Larry*        I don’t know cos I haven’t been able to do anything recently. I’ve had to go straight to the library til Dad picks me up and we go home and I don’t have time to interact with other people.

*Kay*           So what would be helpful for us to talk about today?

*Larry*        One thing that is really terrifying me at the moment is my speech. I have to present it sometime tomorrow. It’s terrifying. I’m scared of what my classmates might think. They’ll probably be bored to sleep which is a good thing. I’m nervous cos my classmates can be quite rude as well. I always worry about what other people will think.

*Kay*           So if you weren’t worried about what they were thinking?

*Larry*        I probably wouldn’t care.

*Kay*           If you weren’t caring what would you be doing instead?

*Larry*        I’d be confident and I wouldn’t worry about what they thought of my speech – argh! - and I’m doing my speech – whatever.



- Kay* So, what if you imagine you wake up tomorrow and your problem with your speech was gone and you're filled with confidence as you give your speech, what would you be doing?
- Larry* I'd walk up to the front of the class - get my cue cards and then start my speech without fast talking cos I wouldn't be nervous. I'd be talking slowly and loudly I guess. Everyone would go 'ok'. People would just leave me. I would be comfortable. It would be an ok speech. My speech is on violins. I used to play them – but it got really hard so I gave up. I'm going to talk slowly and loudly. I want my speech to be dull so there's less attention on me.
- Kay* So it's helpful for you when people don't pay too much attention to you and you're left alone a wee bit.
- Larry* Yes. Cos then I can be more confident. Being confident is being with people I don't know that well but not like being in the centre – but being on the outside. Not like being totally ignored – but just in there a wee bit.
- Kay* So your goal is to be comfortable and confident - being kinda left alone and being comfortable with others?
- Larry* Yes – and to be able to talk up about things that have gone wrong as well.
- Kay* So it's being able to say to people the things you need to say to them?
- Larry* Hmmm. Like my friend who took that money and stuff and saying she paid it back but she didn't.
- Kay* So what might be the first small step you would be able to take to do that?
- Larry* It's tomorrow. I'll have to be talking in front of people. It'll help a bit cos it's something I have to do and it'll probably help even if it's only for a while. I won't practise with my parents cos they'd either laugh at me or go wow! Yes. They either laugh or show over enthusiasm.
- Kay* Is that helpful for you?

*Larry* No.

*Kay* So what's more helpful for you?

*Larry* I'll probably practise in my room or in front of the cat.

*Kay* (Looking at the picture *Larry* drew last week in our counselling session of her Backbone, Figure 6). Does the image of your speech delivery that you just talked about sit in that picture you drew last week?

*Larry* Yes it would. There would probably be another leaf further up. (Draws another leaf). I guess there would be leaves all the way up helping.

*Kay* So the leaves help you?

*Larry* Yes. And I guess there'll be a ton of thorns as well that can cut your confidence down. You kinda got to avoid them.

*Kay* (pointing to drawing). So this is where you were last week. Where are you now?

*Larry* I'm standing here at the bottom about to start the climb.

*Kay* So to go from there to there (indicating on picture) what have you done already?

*Larry* I've walked a couple of steps.

*Kay* So what helped you walk a couple of steps?

*Larry* Like when I can I've talked with my classmates. Not much. But a lot more than I did.

*Kay* So how have you been able to do that?

*Larry* It's when we have to do group project stuff. I try and go with someone else I don't know that well and people have been quite nice even though they're quite loud and stating their opinions.

*Kay*        What have you done differently that's enabled you to be alongside these people you don't know?

*Larry*      Sometimes I'm just quiet and I help with things I'm told to do and sometimes I like talk as well.

*Kay*        When did you do this?

*Larry*      Electronics and science.

*Kay*        What makes it easier in those subjects?

*Larry*      Well mainly because the talk is about talk about the work – instead of other things. There's already something to talk about.

*Kay*        Is that a skill or a strategy you use to cope?

*Larry*      I guess so. I've never thought about it. It just happens by itself. It's easier to talk about work stuff than personal stuff. It's just something that I do.

*Kay*        When did you notice this?

*Larry*      I've just noticed that it's easier in those situations.

*Kay*        So it's a new thing. Is it helpful for you to know that you've got some strategies to cope with talking with groups of people already?

*Larry*      Yes

*Kay*        You had it as a goal last time to talk with groups of other people?

*Larry*      Yes. I know I did and that's good, but I'm really nervous about my speech. I was ok last year and I didn't do that bad.

*Kay*        What's your best hopes for your speech tomorrow?

*Larry* It's probably like I'll feel nice cos it's something I've been worried about and the stresses have gone and I'm happier and relieved. Sometimes I get so panicky and I get nervous and I hyperventilate and then it goes quite bad.

*Kay* Does that happen often?

*Larry* From time to time.

*Kay* So you obviously know that about yourself. So what do you do to cope with that?

*Larry* Usually when that happens there's a friend or my Mum or Dad by me and so they can help me. Last time it happened at the Mall and Dad just took me back to the car.

*Kay* Have you ever stayed in the situation where you've felt panicky and have someone support you to stay put?

*Larry* Not sure. Maybe. I probably have – but I can't remember. My memories not that great. It probably did happen or the year before at speeches. They went ok.

*Kay* So it went ok at speeches in the past? Can you tell me about any of these times when the speeches went ok?

*Larry* One last year and one the year before. The one last year went well. I got into the semi finals.

*Kay* Oh! Wow! You didn't tell me that. Well done. What was that like for you?

*Larry* It was really nice actually. I felt really good but then I found out it was only because my speech was well written, not because I was good at presenting it. It was kinda Myearrr (poking out her tongue)!

*Kay* What was myearrr?

*Larry* I talked too fast and I was too quiet. No one could hear me in the semi finals.

*Kay* So how do you find a bigger voice to use? (mimicking using a louder voice)

*Larry* I don't know. Like in front of my class the first time I was actually quite loud and it was pretty ok.

*Kay* So what is it you need to do for your speech?

*Larry* A big voice and I need to be able to talk slowly cos when I'm nervous I talk really fast.

*Kay* Can you give me a demonstration of how slowly you need to talk?

*Larry* (Mimicking talking really slowly) Maybe this slow would be very good.

*Kay* (Talking really slowly back. Y e s.

*Larry* Yes (smiling)

*Kay* If you knew you were going to go along to your speech tomorrow and talk slowly and loudly would that change where you are on your drawing?

*Larry* Yes. It would take me to the first leaf up here. I can't put it there yet though cos it has to be fully done first before I can put it on. (pointing to the drawing).

*Kay* So you're on that leaf at the bottom. What do you have to do to get up higher?

*Larry* Just climb up basically. Maybe something happens today and I get a boost of confidence and I'll go up another leaf.

*Kay* What will help you notice what it is that helps you?

*Larry* If I feel happy about myself and if I feel I have the ability to talk to other people about things then I'll definitely feel better.

*Kay* So what helps you get that feeling of happy?

*Larry* I don't really know.

*Kay* Well suppose you did know?

*Larry* I'd probably be with friends. When I'm with my friends I do feel quite confident. When they leave or I'm not with them then it goes right down.

*Kay* So when you're with your friends its better?

*Larry* Especially Karla.

*Kay* So what's different for you when you're with Karla?

*Larry* I just feel I have the ability to do things. Like I know she won't laugh at me or make a rude comment.

*Kay* Is that something you want more of?

*Larry* Yes. It's mainly because I know her really well and I know she's not the sort of person who would make a rude comment or be nasty.

*Kay* So if Karla was here where would you shift on your drawing?

*Larry* Probably about here. (indicating higher up on drawing)

*Kay* What do you do differently when you are with Karla. It's what you do. Not just your thinking.

*Larry* Yip! I don't feel nervous going into shops or anything and walking around town doesn't worry me. I guess it's mainly the thoughts that I know that if anyone's going to be rude or laugh at me then Karla will have my back. She'll watch my back. I trust her well and the main thing is – if I do something stupid she won't laugh at me but with me – and I know she won't bring it up later and laugh at me in a way that will hurt me. I've known her for six years now and I know her well. We've had quite a lot of fights but we solve them quite well. We've just always been friends ever since I remember. We're like magnets.

*Kay* So she'll always watch your back?

*Larry* Yes. And I'll watch hers.

*Kay* That's pretty neat eh! So when she's with you, you can do things differently?

*Larry* Yes. I don't understand it either. It's just like when I'm with certain people I have confidence. Like a few weekends ago we went to Karla's school and we were just walking around and we met up with some of her friends. I was kinda nervous about that – but when I met them I was really confident and I was actually quite loud and like I felt like I knew them even though I didn't. Yes. I was really confident.

*Kay* So that's quite an exception isn't it?

*Larry* Like if I was with another friend it would be like... (makes a tentative gesture) instead though. I don't understand it either.

*Kay* But it's something you want more of?

*Larry* Definitely.

*Kay* Have you ever thought that if you can do it with Karla and go to her school and be confident you could be confident elsewhere?

*Larry* Probably. It would be nerve racking though and I'd be worried.

*Kay* So if you thought about not worrying about it and instead thought about being confident what would you be doing?

*Larry* I'd probably still be nervous – but I'd try my best. Things could really go well if I wasn't nervous.

*Kay* So it's helpful to think that two weeks ago you went to Karla's school and you weren't nervous but confident?

*Larry* Yes and I didn't care about what people thought. We were walking around the playground chatting and stuff. We were talking about everything that was happening to us in the moment. They were talking and I was talking. It was nice.

*Kay* Have you talked with Karla about this?

*Larry* A bit. I don't really talk with anyone about it though. She only sees me confident. She gets confused about it. She doesn't see that I have a lack of confidence. Mum just says I have to get over it and it's stupid. So if Mum saw me that day at the school and she talked with me about my lacking confidence she would say I'm probably attention seeking.

*Kay* Would you say you're attention seeking?

*Larry* No. Not really.

*Kay* So what is it you're trying to get instead?

*Larry* Well I'd like advice from Mum but she doesn't really give it much.

*Kay* Would you like that to be different?

*Larry* Yes. Like a lot of the time she makes comments about my things are stupid and there's no need to worry and it's really dumb for me to worry.

*Kay* Has that always been like that?

*Larry* No. From time to time she'll be really nice and talk to me and help me but a lot of the time she wouldn't be.

*Kay* It sounds like it's tricky for you to just get over it?

*Larry* Yes.

*Kay* What is it that's tricky to get over?

*Larry* Being afraid of people and having zero confidence. It would be a really big leap to just get over it. Dad's usually busy with his work and stuff and when I do talk to him he makes suggestions to help but they are often a step too far for me – like going to the Mall and staying there for a while – or to talk to everyone I meet.



*Kay* So that's a big bridge?

*Larry* yes. I want small steps.

*Kay* who will be with you when you grow your confidence?

*Larry* You.

*Kay* Well, I'd have to say that I'll be here alongside you and we'll work together so you can grow your ideas like that plant in your drawing. How does that sound?

*Larry* That's great cos if I wasn't coming here I wouldn't have thought of all these ideas.

*Kay* (looking at picture). So do you want to grow thorns or leaves?

*Larry* Leaves (smiling)

*Kay* So you want more leaves. How much do you want this? How much do you want to grow your confidence?

Scaling "I want to be confident this much", Larry scaled this at an 8.

*Kay* Wow! That means you're pretty keen to grow more of those leaves? So what do you have to do to grow more of those leaves?

*Larry* It's to do with other people. Cos if I know that other people don't care about what I do then I know that they won't have bad thoughts of me and think I'm weird or stupid.

*Kay* I'm just checking – (looking at drawing) – are Backbone and Confidence the same thing or different?

*Larry* The same thing.

*Kay* So if you're going to grow leaves it's to do with other people. What would be the first small step you would take?

*Larry* Maybe I would even use the thorns to get a step up.

*Kay* Do the thorns give you a wee prod to get you up there?

*Larry* Yes (smiling). Some would probably help me up but others would push me down.

*Kay* So what would you say to the ones that are pushing you down?

*Larry* I'm not sure.

*Kay* Think about that one. Pretend you are sure.

*Larry* I'd probably have to remove them with a chainsaw (giggling). Or a butter knife (smiling).

*Kay* There's a big difference between a butter knife and a chainsaw. Which one would you prefer?

*Larry* A chainsaw.

*Kay* Why do you have to get rid of them? Is there any way you can go around them?

*Larry* I could go around them to avoid them. Other leaves would also help me get around them.

*Kay* You've got a very descriptive image there of what you need to do to help yourself. Are these leaves about people?

*Larry* Yes. People. Cos it's mainly about my relationship with other people and I can't really get confidence by saying hello to a cat!

*Kay* No. But you can use your voice slowly and loudly with the cat and that can help you with your speech?

*Larry* Yes (smiling)

*Kay* So your small steps involve other people who can help you?

*Larry* Yes. Karla and Evie and Belinda – they could help me a lot.

*Kay* With all the things we've talked about today what has been the most helpful?

*Larry* Talking about when I was really confident with Karla and her friends.

In the counselling session we then took a break so Larry could think of some suggestions that would help. Larry gave suggestions related to the speech tomorrow: "talk slow and loud, look at the wall ahead and not at people". On the written feedback sheet (Exception Feedback – Appendix A) Larry scaled her response to the conversation about being confident with Karla and her friends at a 9/10. Larry's written comments on the feedback sheet:

It was really nice being able to talk about my confidence issues again. I was able to get lots of advice, ideas and also find out more about myself. I know what to do for my next big step in gaining confidence.

### **5.2.2 The Counsellor's Story**

As I watched the video recording of this session, I realised that I had developed my skills in using solution-focused techniques. I had finally, after considerable self-doubt, faced up to watching the videos of earlier sessions with Emily. Watching these videos, alongside the one of this session, I started to see the value in what I was doing, rather than fixate on my perceived inadequacies. I was slowly becoming more comfortable with *my* way of working and I was able to stand back and look more objectively at what was happening. My weekly supervision session with Ben was invaluable in helping me to recognise and to see value in my way of working.

As I watched the video of the counselling session with Larry I became aware of how I worked at reframing problem talk and at amplifying positive change and exceptions. I worked at finding Larry-led possibilities for solution building, based on her strengths, skills and resources, on the understanding that she is the expert in her own life. Coping Questions helped Larry identify how she had already talked up in class in electronics and science. When Larry was asked the Exception Question – was there ever a time when she felt panicky but stayed in the situation – she was able to identify her speech last year which went well.

My curiosity and not-knowing stance drew out more details from this story. I worked to keep my questions following Larry's previous answer. By following the conversation, Larry felt like she was being listened to. I realised that this can provide more possibilities for exploring Exception Questions that might have otherwise been overlooked if I had stayed more rigid in my questioning. The rapport that Larry and I had developed, where she knew that she could be honest with me when she didn't want to do something also meant that I was able to probe for more detail without her feeling pressured. This was exemplified when she talked about her exception time with Karla. Probing questions helped Larry to recognise that there had been times in the past when the problem wasn't there.

I wanted to think of Larry as my teacher, to help me to discover how best I can use solution-focused techniques that fit for me, without making this explicit to her. I wanted to be guided in an organic way, rather than over-engineering the session. I wanted to be in the moment with her. This session really helped me to have the confidence to keep working away at making conversations with adolescent students more concrete through drawing and art, and by using these artworks to externalise the problem and to free up conversations so they can be more light-hearted and hopefully memorable and helpful. It's interesting that the goal in the session for Larry was to be more confident. I feel like I'm the one who has grown in confidence from analysing this session.

### **5.2.3 Analysis**

Without asking her whether or how the Exception Question helped to bring about change, Larry answered this question in the lively feedback she gave after reading her story, "My Speech". She noticed that:

I was a lot more light-hearted and it seemed like I was able to get over my nervousness for presenting my speech by talking about it and realising I've done it ok in the past so I can do it again. I also noticed when I read my story that I'm very dependent on friends. I realise now that when I am nervous or worried it really helps to talk to someone you trust instead of keeping it all bottled up inside.

She also read The Counsellor Story and commented that, "I liked the light-hearted conversation because I was so scared and nervous, but having a fun conversation helped".

Referring to the probing conversations in the counsellor story, she remarked, “I sometimes have trouble thinking of ideas and I find it hard when I’m pushed”.

The power of keeping the conversation solution-focused and integrating the Exception Question helped Larry to access her own exceptions. An example of this was when Larry talked about a time, a few weekends earlier, when she was confident in her friendship with Karla. This proved to be particularly helpful and useful when Larry was slipping back into problem talk. O’Connell (2005) acknowledges that the roots of solution-focused therapy lie in empowerment, self-esteem and hope, to help clients establish what they want different in their lives. These core elements are reflected in Larry’s uplifting feedback: “it was good to find out more about myself. I know what to do for my next big step in gaining confidence”. Addressing problems in ways that are nonthreatening and memorable relate to the ways I have worked in the past with younger children and their families and my passionate conviction that creative storytelling can bring about positive change and hope for those involved (Henson, Smith and Mayo, 2009).

Larry experienced creative uses of the Exception Question when she looked at her drawing of her backbone from the previous week and related the exception story she had just shared in this session to the drawing. I asked her whether “the image of your speech delivery ... sit[s] in the picture you drew last week?”, to which she responded affirmatively that there would be “leaves to help her up”. She also acknowledged “tons of thorns”. Later in the session Larry decided that she could use the leaves to jump higher and, whilst some thorns might provide steps to help her up, others would push her down. Larry’s response to the ones pushing her down was to remove them with either a chainsaw or a butter knife. Larry was also able to acknowledge ways she could get around them. When Larry was asked if the leaves were about people, Larry responded affirmatively that “it’s mainly about my relationships with other people”. This demonstrates how art and drawings can provide a sense of continuity across sessions and can connect different exception stories. A drawing has relevance and application beyond the session in which it was created.

Larry experienced other creative applications of the Exception Question in this story. We used role-play and humour to dramatise and exaggerate a speech delivery – talking slowly and then loudly – as we talked about an exception time when Larry’s delivery of a speech had gone well. This was a playful, relationship-building exercise: we laughed about the speech,

making it all seem a bit less scary; but I ensured Larry knew that I respected her and the things she wanted to change. As De Jong and Berg (2008) claim, there are no limits to people's creativity if what they want different in their lives is respected and used as a starting point in solution building.

As for the impact of this story on my role as a counsellor and my ongoing learning, I found that the process of (re)viewing the video recording of this session while transcribing it, alongside another story I was transcribing for Emily, really made me see the value in what I was doing and how students experienced this. This exercise – of viewing and transcribing – also helped me to get over my insecurities about seeing myself on video.

Viewing this session I was able to see how I worked at reframing problem talk and at amplifying positive change and exceptions. By incorporating Larry's drawing into the conversation, further possibilities were able to be explored – led by Larry. This gave Larry the opportunity to be creative and imaginative and playful and to find out what was most helpful and useful for her to move forward. My work with Larry reminded me of De Shazer's argument that, in solution-focused therapy, problems are best understood in relation to their solutions. I found Larry's final comment after reading the stories inspiring and profound:

Chainsaws – and yes light-hearted conversations – can help a lot. One thing I really loved about the session is that it's helping me understand ... well... me. And that it's not just – 'ok do this and this to solve your problem' – but that it's helping me understand what I want to do.

### **5.3 “Landing right and not falling” (26 September 2013)**

#### **5.3.1 Larry's Story**

This conversation took place as Larry completed the consent form for videoing the counselling session.

*Kay*            You have just been telling me how you don't like looking at videos of yourself?

*Larry*           Well. I won't have to look at it.

*Kay*            Well you could look at it if you wanted to.

*Larry* No, no (shaking head). I don't like looking at myself.

*Kay* Is that something you want to talk about?

*Larry* Nar!

*Kay* Hey! So what's better?

*Larry* Well I did my speech (smiling).

*Kay* Wow! I am all ears.

*Larry* I was really nervous. I mucked up a lot but hey! But it was pretty ok. I was really nervous. I kinda cried afterwards. I didn't know I was going to be next – and it was all this nervousness and shock all at once. And then I went up there. I think it was ok

*Kay* So what helped you be ok?

*Larry* I did look up at the wall. I looked at the posters. It helped quite a bit.

*Kay* So I wonder if we looked at your drawing if there would be any changes.

*Larry* (looking at her drawing) I'm climbing up using a thorn. I'm going up slowly and surely.

*Kay* So what helped you go up?

*Larry* Well maybe doing the speech. Afterwards no one talked to me about it. I realised they didn't really care. That made me happy. If they'd come up to me and said 'your speech was great' it would have made me feel bad. When I do something right and I think I did bad and people say I did really good I don't like it. Like some of the time I do but most of the time I don't. It's kinda weird.

*Kay* So it's hard for you sometimes hearing other people's opinions if they are different to yours – and you'd sooner not be at the centre of conversations?

*Larry* Yes – I'd sooner be in the background.

*Kay* So tell me more about the steps you've already taken.

*Larry* Well I've talked more with other people and it might not really seem like much but I was able to ask someone I didn't know in one of my classes for a pencil cos I forgot my pencil case. Most people would think that was something really minor and something that doesn't matter at all but it seems like a really big thing to me because I can't talk to other people I don't really know.

*Kay* So when did this talking happen?

*Larry* In maths. I thought about it for five minutes first. I was saying to myself should I ask? Shouldn't I ask? – And then I just did it.

*Kay* Is that something different that you would not normally do?

*Larry* Yes. I just asked nicely, not rudely – and they gave me the pen. I did something.

*Kay* But you still managed to find your voice and your confidence and talk to someone in the class and to ask for a pen. How did you do that?

*Larry* It was just something I needed to do. I knew I wouldn't find one in my bag. I needed one or I would get into trouble for not doing the work – so I just had to do it. I asked.

*Kay* Is that something you want to do more?

*Larry* Yes. I really need to find my own voice and to talk to other people and stuff – and talk up for myself – and to communicate with others without being scared.

*Kay* So what will be different when you do this?

*Larry* Well, I'd be able to talk to other people and ask them for help with things and state my own opinion I guess without worrying that someone's going to yell at me.



*Kay*        So you want to be able to express your own opinion and to say what you want.

*Larry*       ...without being terrified of being judged – like in one of my classes I can't say a word without being terrified.

*Kay*        Not even a word?

*Larry*        No –other than to say 'yes'.

*Kay*        So you can say a word even if it is only one word?

*Larry*        Yes but it's really limited. I want to be able to speak up more. It's to talk up more in general – not just in class – every situation.

*Kay*        Well you came in here today feeling quite pleased with yourself with what you've already achieved with talking up in class.

*Larry*        ... and the speech.

*Kay*        Yes. So are you saying that if you can talk up more and communicate with others without being scared it would shift you on your drawing.

*Larry*        Probably almost at the top. There's sort of a difference with talking with people you know and people you don't know at all.

*Kay*        You've mentioned before that your friendship with Karla is different.

*Larry*        Yes. We talk a lot. We talk about ourselves and we question each other. She used to always agree with me but then she started having her own voice. She started having her own opinions. I noticed that was different. She was talking more about what she thought and not just agreeing with me. Things started sounding like she really meant it. It just happened with her though. Cos when I talked a bit with her about getting confidence like her she didn't really know. I guess it just came to her as she got older.

*Kay*        What was that like for you when your friendship with her changed and she started standing up to you?

*Larry*      It was ok.

*Kay*        Do you like other people having their opinions?

*Larry*      Yes. I like it more when they say negative things about me so I know more how to improve myself – and it gives me some ideas on things I might want to think about changing about myself.

*Kay*        I'm curious. Is that to make them happy or for you?

*Larry*      Most of the time I think it might be to please others – then I think that's stupid – then I want to change it. If I think what they want me to change is stupid I won't change it.

*Kay*        It sounds like it sometimes gets a bit confusing – thinking about what others think and thinking about yourself and your own opinions.

*Larry*      Yes. It sure does.

*Kay*        Well I'm wondering if now might be a good time if you recap what you've already done and to think what might be the next small step you could take (looking at picture)

*Larry*      (looking at picture) Well I've started some planning, I've talked up in maths and I've done my speech.

*Kay*        I wonder how far up do you think you can go and what you'll need to do to get there. If we put this on a scale of 1-10 and 10 was the most confident you could be where would you put yourself now?

*Larry*      I'm at a 5.75 almost to a 6. I'm starting working my way up. I can see myself at an 8 or almost a 9.

- Kay* What would be different at an 8 or a 9?
- Larry* I wouldn't have too much confidence. I'd still respect others. I'd think about my actions before I did things and I'd think about others. I'd be definitely going to the Mall. I really want to go to the Mall.
- Kay* I wonder where going to the Mall is on your drawing and what you'd have to do to get there?
- Larry* It would be right near the top. I don't want to do it yet (looking at drawing). I'd have to draw a leaf here (pointing) so I can bounce on it to get me up there (pointing to top of picture where the Mall is represented). I could either bounce to the top or fall if I didn't land right (laughing).
- Kay* You have a very clear vision of where you want to go. So the goal is to land right and not fall? What would Mum and Dad notice if you moved up the flower to your backbone and confidence?
- Larry* They'd notice I'd talk more and I'd go outside more. There's a problem though. When I go outside they ask me to take the dog for a walk. He's really naughty and nothing's working to make it better. He doesn't listen to me. I don't know whether he is aggressive or friendly. If Mum was there she would probably say that she'd come – and if Dad saw he'd think I'd be saying it as an excuse not to take the dog for a walk. It doesn't matter how many times I tell him – he just won't believe me.
- Kay* It sounds like you've started to think up some good ideas but then as soon as you start thinking of a solution another problem sneaks in. We don't want to get into problem talk but rather to find some ways forward that help.
- Kay* Could the dog be part of a solution, I wonder? You mentioned you want to get outside more and taking the dog for walks gets you outside and it sounds like Mum and Dad like you walking the dog.

*Larry* One way to solve it is to go out when Mum's at home. Yes – friends and taking the dog for walks would get me outside more – if he's not biting.

*Kay* Is it helpful to think that finding a way to walk the dog is helpful to your goal of getting outside more, being round other people and getting more confidence and backbone?

*Larry* Well – when I go outside I actually notice that a lot of people actually come up and ask me about him (the dog) and say he's really cute. Last time though he jumped up on me and made me let go of the leash.

*Kay* So who's the person that can help you cope better with the dog so you can go for walks and get outside more?

*Larry* Probably Mum. Mum and the dog have a good relationship. He listens to her.

*Kay* So have you talked to Mum?

*Larry* Yes I talked to her about being worried and she said she would call the dog trainer – and it would be best not to walk the dog alone. She will go with me.

*Kay* So you've already used some strategies to solve your own problems. You've already negotiated with Mum and told her you need some help with the dog?

*Larry* Yes. I hadn't realised.

*Kay* So you've done all that planning. How's that for you?

*Larry* It feels great that I've done that. Usually when I've got a problem I just leave it and try to avoid it. It could really help with the problem and me. It makes me feel like I've really done something.

*Kay* So tell me again what you've done

*Larry* I've talked to other people, I've asked for a pen, I did my speech and I've negotiated things with Mum.

*Kay* So now whose got the skills with the dog at the moment?

*Larry* Mum – and the dog trainer’s even better.

*Kay* And do you want some of those skills?

*Larry* Yes

*Kay* (looking at the ‘Backbone’ drawing) So when you think about the story that you’ve just talked about – the dog and negotiating with Mum to help, where would that take you, knowing that you’ve set that plan in place?

*Larry* It would be higher – but not that much higher.

*Kay* A worthwhile small step though?

*Larry* Yes

*Kay* That sounds like a plan – well done

On the written feedback sheet (Exception Feedback – Appendix A) at the end of the session Larry scaled her response to the conversation about negotiating with Mum to help with the dog at a 9.5/10.

Larry’s comments on the feedback sheet:

It was really great being able to talk. I found out more about what I had done even if I didn’t think I had done anything. Such as negotiating with Mum! I know what to do next to gain confidence and am proud of what I had done. It was a really great session. Thank you. Usually I have problems following my own plans, but this session (and the others) have helped me with this as well.

### **5.3.2 The Counsellor’s Story**

What a great start to the session when Larry was able to acknowledge that doing her speech was something she identified as being better for her.

I would have liked to talk with Larry more about her reluctance to see herself on video. My research has highlighted some of the difficulties I have had in watching video recordings of my counselling. I know for me it has taken time to be able to watch a video and to be positive. I realise I am now able to look at a video of a session and identify times that are going well. I like to call these my own exceptions. I would be curious to know whether Larry's perception of her problem and her feelings about watching a video of herself might shift if she were to see a brief clip of her talking about her negotiations with her Mum.

This session also highlighted to me how I worked at trying to stay true to solution-focused therapy. For Larry it seemed hard at times to think about possibilities and things she could do to change her perception of her problem. There seemed to be so many challenges in the way of moving forward. When an exception was explored – and Larry seemed energised – another problem crept in.

Larry said, "I can't say a word without being terrified, not even a word other than to say yes", to which I responded that she "*can* say a word even if it is only one word" (emphasis added). This led to more positive Larry-led conversations, as she identified that her goal was "to speak up more in general – not just in class – but in every situation", and how her previous successes and exceptions of speaking up and delivering her speech were already small steps she had taken towards this goal. For Larry, "climbing up using a thorn", represented delivering her speech. This expression exemplifies the fact that she needs to take small steps to overcome an obstacle, but she finds these difficult. Larry was not aware that she had taken many of these steps already until our conversation revealed this. Larry's conversation about her negotiations with her mother to help her with the dog, for example, showed how a recent exception was not obvious until our conversation made it so.

I found that when we used Larry's drawing ("Backbone", Figure 6) to externalise the problem we were able to have scaling conversations around any changes in thinking. The representation of the leaves, the thorns and then Larry's imaginative idea of having leaves that she could bounce on to go higher towards her goal of confidence enabled us to have some fun conversations around a serious topic. The details of some of Larry's exceptions were identified, even the tiny ones, and made more visible through the process of drawing. Hopefully, these will become more memorable and accessible so that Larry will get more control over the problem and her life. The drawing also provided a gateway through which

we could revisit conversations from previous sessions, as well as earlier conversations from the current one. This helped Larry identify new things that she “hadn’t realised”.

In this session Larry was able to see how she had already made some progress. She could map this progress on her drawing and represent what she wanted to achieve in her preferred future. In her written feedback after the session, she said that she had “found out more about what I had done even if I didn’t think I had done anything and I am proud of what I have done”.

### **5.3.3 Analysis**

After reading her “Landing right and not falling” story and The Counsellor’s Story, we talked about what she noticed about herself. Larry’s growing self-awareness suggests changes that the Exception Question can effect: “I notice that I tend to want to please others a lot. I only change if I think what others want me to change is ok – but it is getting better as I remember the small steps I have already taken”. This provides an illustration of the solution-focused tenet that “small steps can lead to big changes” (Connie and Metcalf, 2009, p. 304). In this story Larry was able to access and use strategies that had worked for her in the past and repeat these for the delivery of her speech: “I did look up at the wall. I looked at the posters. It helped quite a bit”. Berg and Dolan (2001) stress the importance of examining the exception so that the client can recognise and repeat it and Larry was able to do this. Invited through my questioning, Larry was able to tell me more about the steps she had already taken and notice what was different. This process helped Larry to identify her goal: “Yes I really need to find my own voice and to talk to other people and stuff – and talk up for myself – and to communicate with others without being scared”.

As with all of her stories, Larry’s drawing of her Backbone – a creative application of the Exception Question – is inextricably linked to any changes that she perceived in herself. Larry had already identified that she likes to draw if she finds it difficult to talk so by having the drawing available I could support her to access the skills and strategies she had identified that work for her. In the feedback, Larry acknowledged: “I found out more about what I had done even if I didn’t think I had done anything. I know what to do next to gain confidence and am proud of what I had done”. Through using the drawing to complement the talking a space was created for Larry to move forward.

In terms of my ongoing learning, this story highlighted for me the power of being curious and adopting a not-knowing stance (Connie, 2009) to work gently towards eliciting exceptions and solutions talk from a client. Connie urges counsellors to put aside their own frame of reference so as to explore those of the client. An example of this was when I said to Larry: “Not even a word?” This curiosity led Larry to identify other past exceptions and, looking at her drawing, to see where this new thinking and new perception of her problem could take her. This emphasises the power in revisiting past exceptions and bringing these into the here and now through the words and experiences of the client.

The influence of Larry’s stories on my role as a counsellor and my ongoing learning overlaps with the lessons I took from working with Emily, and indeed with all my other students, participants and nonparticipants in this study. The stories highlighted for me the simplicity of the solution-focused approach when I feel my way with it, rather than over-think it, and they confirmed for me the place that art and drawing have within the model.

A point of difference in my study is that I used drawing(s) to externalise the problem and to have scaling conversations around any changes in thinking. I used client drawings to replace the standard scale in solution-focused therapy. I have also used it to help clients build onto their story each session. Another point of difference in my study is I have encouraged students to use drawings to explore exceptions and the consequences of looking at and considering exceptions – what I do, what I could do, how my thinking might change, how this might affect others around me and how it might affect the way I think about things.

In both Emily’s “Tiredness” and Larry’s “Backbone”, the drawings enabled the students to externalise the problem and consider small steps they could take to improve their situation. Similarly, the interplay between drawings and conversations in Larry’s story “Landing right and not falling” allowed Larry to *see* these steps.

The stories also make apparent the fundamental nature of solution-focused conversation: that delicate relationship between listening and following, and probing for more detail. After reading her story and The Counsellor Story, Larry commented that she was,

pleased I wasn’t forced into talking about why I didn’t like looking at videos of myself and I liked how I was listened to about that. I also liked how the



counselling session was mainly led by me and the things I wanted to talk about and how the fun conversations make a serious conversation easier to talk about.

As I reflected in *The Counsellor Story*, I would have liked to discuss further Larry's reluctance to watch herself on video; however, this feedback reminds me of the importance of following the lead of the client (Connie, 2009), always sensitive to their reactions and feelings as to the direction of the conversation.

In terms of my influencing my counselling, this idea of sensitivity suggests two different ways of listening and responding. Firstly, it reminds me of the importance of being sensitive to the feelings, attitudes and values of the client, allowing them to either talk uninterrupted or, conversely, avoid talking about something, thereby building trust. Secondly – in a way that is compatible with the first – this idea suggests listening with keen, sensitive ears for opportunities to explore even probe for exceptions so that these can be emphasised for the client (Concoran, 2002).

## Chapter 6: Julie and Bethany

*I am a Year 11 student and I live at home with both my parents and my brother and two sisters. Sometimes I find things at home difficult and I don't talk with my parents about my problems. I came to counselling because I was having some issues with some friends and also things weren't going well at home. I asked Bethany to come with me because I did not want to come on my own. – Julie*

*I am a Year 11 student and my parents are split. I go back and forth between my parents during the week. I am the middle child and I have an older brother and younger sister. I love dance and any form of exercise. I came to counselling to support my friend. – Bethany*

### 6.1 Story 1 (15 August 2013)<sup>5</sup>

#### 6.1.1 Julie and Bethany's Stories

Julie came to this counselling session with her friend Bethany for support.

*Julie* Friends is the problem. I fell out with a friend - another friend doesn't like me. I wanted to fix things.

*Kay* What would you like to be different?

*Julie* I'd like to be able to talk to them. I have trust issues. I'm scared of what I talk about.

*Bethany* Julie wants to settle it.

*Kay* Is there someone that you can trust to talk to without being scared?

*Julie* Yes, with Bethany. She's honest – and she also tells me her problems.

*Bethany* People say I'm wise. I'm ok about letting a lot of talk go.

*Kay* Is it helpful having Bethany to talk to.

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<sup>5</sup> Julie and Bethany did not name their stories.

*Julie* Yes. I'm used to friends leaving me. Bethany says she won't leave me. I know how important it is to have someone to talk to. I'd like to change things with friends.

*Kay* So what else would be different if things were different with friends?

*Julie* I'd have better friendships. I'd be able to talk about things. They would talk to me too. There would be less fighting and I'd feel better about myself. I'd be happy and I would be trusted more by my parents. I would also dance.

*Kay* So you're here today talking with Bethany and with me. It sounds like you're already doing a little bit of what you want. If you were to look on a scale of 1-10 and 10 was the best it could be with your friendships, what would you call a 10?

*Julie* Unicorns. They're magical. They're high and mighty. I'd feel better about myself. Bethany is my cool unicorn. I want my friendships to be like the one I have with Bethany.

*Kay* And where would you put yourself on that scale?

*Julie* At a 2.5. I'm not coping. There's lots of fights and words that shouldn't be said. There's lots of bitching. I'm not coping at home and I'm over thinking.

*Kay* So what do you think might be the first small step that you might be able to make to move up the scale towards the magical unicorns of friendships?

*Julie* I'd need effort and work to move and to change the way I go about things.

*Kay* So what would you be doing differently?

*Julie* Instead of txtng and facebook I'd be talking to my friends. Advice that I ask for is seen as attention-seeking

*Bethany* It's seeking help. I don't think its attention-seeking.

*Julie* It's the way I do things that I want to be different and how I think about myself.

*Kay* Is talking with Bethany and hearing what she has to say helpful to you?

*Julie* Yes

*Kay* And could it be helpful for you too Bethany, talking with Julie?

*Bethany* Yes

*Kay* So how are things for you Bethany? If you were to scale between 1-10 where would things be for you right now?

*Bethany* At a 4. Exercise is my way of coping and my stress relief.

*Kay* So if you were to think about what you'd like your preferred future to be – I wonder what would be different and what might be the same?

I invited Bethany and Julie to draw their Current and Future Islands, and include words that represented how things were at present (on their Current Island) and how they would like things to be (on their Future Island) After they had drawn their Current Islands, I put it to them:

So there is water between your Current Island and the Future Island. Now put words on your Future Island that would make you want to swim/move towards it. There might be things on your Current Island that you might like to take with you – and there might be things you want to leave behind.

These drawings are represented below in Figures 7 and 8 below.



Figure 7: Julie's Current and Future Islands

The words Julie had on her representation of her Current Island were: parents, trust issues, siblings, fighting, not being trusted, stressed, falling out, hate maths and science, worried, pressure, feeling down, bitchiness, nasty, mean, school, dance, relationships, sad, rude, left out, friends, adults, annoyed.

The words Julie put on her Future Island: Happiness, trusted by parents, trust people more, more self esteem, more good friends, feeling better about myself, being able to talk about things, less fighting, trusting more, better friendships and dance. Julie identified that she would leave behind: stress, worried, trust issues, fighting, left out, bitchiness, falling out, pressure, maths, science, sad, rude, annoyed, school, parents, siblings.

On this drawing Julie scaled her 'Desire to move to a better island' at a 10/10.

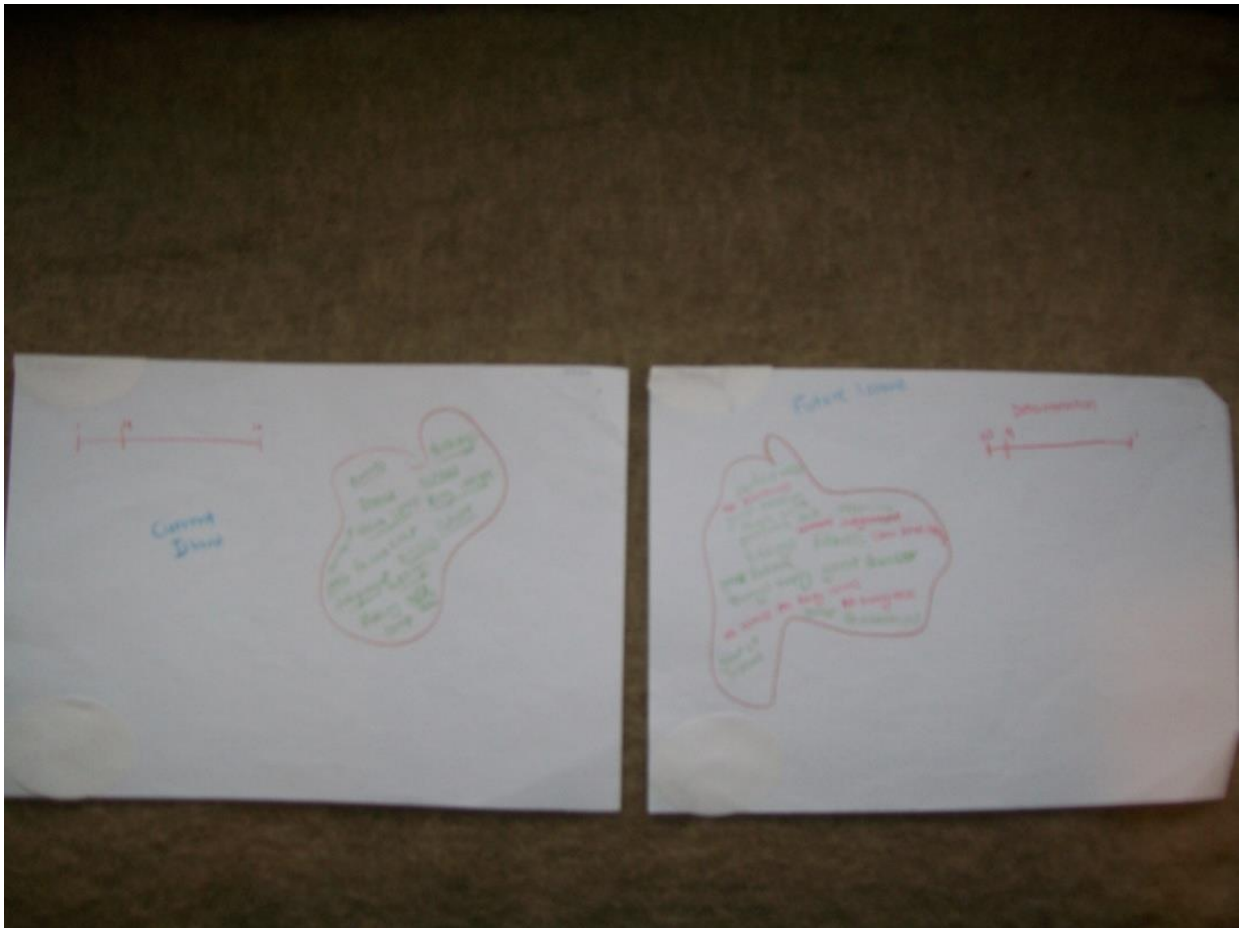


Figure 8: Bethany's Current and Future Islands

The words Bethany had on her representation of her Current Island were: parents, dance, head space, feelings, school, body image, workouts, stress, judgement, friendship, siblings, baking, sleep, left out.

The words Bethany put on her Future Island: Perfectness, great relationships with parents and siblings, great future, always happy, relaxing, fitness, great dancer, great at school, friendships. Bethany identified that there would be no more bitching, no more judgement, clear head space, no stress, no body issues and no loneliness.

On this drawing Bethany scaled her 'Determination to get to a future island' at a 9/10.

Julie and Bethany then shared their stories and our conversation continued:

*Kay*            So what will you be doing when things are better?

*Julie*            Going crazy and dancing around my room.

*Kay*            Is that something you'd like to do more of?

*Julie and Bethany*        Yes

Both girls identified that being playful and having fun together helped them enjoy each other's company and better support each other and to cope when times were hard.

On the written feedback sheet (Exception Feedback – Appendix A) Julie scaled her response to the Current/Future Island exercise at a 9/10. Julie's written comments on the feedback sheet: "It identified the problem and helped to see what was bothering me in the current time. It also helped me to see what I want changed so that I'm happier. The way I do things and how I feel about myself".

On the written feedback sheet (Exception Feedback – Appendix A) Bethany scaled her response to the Current/Future Island exercise at a 10/10. Bethany's comments on the feedback sheet: "It shows me what I want and need to do to make myself better/ feel better about who I am. I think I can do most of it and it has given me a clear path".

### **6.1.2 The Counsellor's Story**

Julie and Bethany gave consent to be participants in my study in early September. I asked both girls if I was able to incorporate this earlier story as part of my study as it was a session in which the girls talked about exception times as I tried a different application of solution-focused therapy. I had been looking through some literature and seen this Current/Future Island resource described by Hanton (2012).

I was interested in the ways the two girls worked together with solution building and giving ideas to each other. I wondered how this might help me explore the second part of my research question on how students experience creative uses of the Exception Question. I also wondered how helpful it could be having two friends working together. The 'Exception friend' for Julie was Bethany and I was curious about whether this was helpful for Bethany too.

Before this session I had spent some time thinking about the data I already had for my study – the drawings, notes, evaluation forms and video recordings, as well as my notes from my supervision with Ben and the notes in my reflective journal. It is an important balance to strike: finding ways of applying solution-focused therapy that work for me that are helpful for the student. I am drawn to the language of narrative therapy, which helps to externalise the problem, and I am interested in exploring how this can fit alongside the exception-seeking Questions of solution-focused therapy.

Counselling sessions I had had with other students not part of my study also revealed how drawing and art had become commonplace in my counselling. The notice board is filled with drawings that students had agreed to have displayed. Looking at these now, I notice that many represent exception times in these students' lives. They are not superficial embellishments – drawings on the board to make it colourful, though they do that as well. They provide images of hope and represent positive energy. While each is personal to the individual, they can create a talking point for others who come into the room.

The drawings of Bethany and Julie created a concrete space where the girls were able to see some small changes that were already happening and identify some of the strengths and resources they already had. They each heard the stories of the other and how they had coped in the past and discovered new possibilities. And, many of these conversations were light-hearted: Julie said she would be “going crazy and dancing around the room” as she imagined things being better. They also had conversations about how they could better manage themselves and possible steps to take to enable this to happen more effectively. I am grateful that Bethany and Julie were keen to join my study and their participation will give me further insights into exploring exceptions in creative ways and how this might be helpful to students in my counselling.

After reading their story, the girls each reflected. Bethany remarked that: “It was cool that I only came to counselling to support Julie but I got something out of it as well”. Julie found that: “It’s been helpful seeing the words I wrote down – and when I look at it again it helps me remember what I can do to help myself – and I remember some of the things we talked about that day”.



### 6.1.3 Analysis

The technique outlined by Hanton (2012) of using drawing and words for clients to create their Current and Future Islands was used in this session. The experience of Julie and Bethany suggests that this application of the Exception Question technique can be helpful, as indicated by their feedback. Both students identified what they would like to be different and imagined what they would be doing that would indicate things had changed. Both girls identified: “being playful and having fun together helped them enjoy each other’s company and better support each other and to cope when times were hard”. Julie explained doing the drawing “helped [me] to see what was bothering me in the current time. It also helped me to see what I wanted changed so that I’m happier and the way I do things and how I feel about myself”. For Bethany: “It shows me what I want and need to do to make myself better/ feel better about who I am. I think I can do most of it and it has given me a clear path”. The students’ feedback provides clear examples of solutions talk, focusing on exception times and identifying those things that bring about change.

In terms of my second research question, their drawings created a concrete space where the students could identify small changes that were already happening and identify some of the strengths and resources they already had. They each heard the story of the other and how they had coped in the past and discovered new possibilities. And many of these conversations were light-hearted. De Shazer (1985) argues that problems are best understood in relation to their solutions and this story highlights a way of being creative while accessing solution talk. The written feedback for Julie and Bethany in the counselling session indicated that it was a helpful exercise. Julie scaled her response to the Current/Future Island exercise at a 9/10 and Bethany scaled it at a 10/10. Referring to her drawing, Julie commented, “when I look at it again it helps me remember what I can do to help myself – and remember some of the things we talked about that day”. This feedback corresponds with Concoran’s (2002) view that by adapting solution-focused techniques you better meet the developmental needs of a younger client.

The role of my counselling supervisor with whom I shared my reflections, my counsellor stories and my emerging curiosities supported my ongoing learning a great deal. The idea of considering my supervisor a critical friend (Smyth, 1992) with whom I could talk about things I was doing, work to understand things better as well as to consider different perspectives was a key feature of these times together and vital to my research. On this

occasion, my reflections in my counsellor story outline some of my learning. In particular I noticed that drawing and art had become commonplace in my counselling, these images providing hope and representing positive energy.

Another lesson that this experience highlighted was the need to consider the reflective nature of narrative inquiry to help make sense of the many layers of stories generated by my research process. Barkhuizen and Hacker (2008) describe this relationship between the different positions a counsellor occupies – as participant and inquirer – and they suggest that narrative inquiry enables meanings to manifest and evolve over time: through the reflective process of sharing, analysing and interpreting stories, each retelling offers new opportunities to learn. I needed to trust this process.

## **6.2 Story 2 (22 August 2013)**

### **6.2.1 Julie and Bethany's Stories**

In this counselling session, the girls' Current and Future Islands were on the table. The write-up below covers only the part of the session where we revisited these drawings.

*Kay*        If you both look at your drawing from last week and the words you put on your current island can you identify one thing that you've coped with in the past and might be helpful for us to talk about today?

The girls shared their stories:

*Bethany*    Stress

*Kay*        What was different that enabled you to cope?

*Bethany*    Because we all got along better – I didn't have as much to deal with.

*Kay*        What did you do that was different then?

*Bethany*    I started ways to release stress.

*Kay*        How did you do this?

*Bethany* I took time out for me and I exercised. And I tried not to worry too much. My friends and my parents notice when things are better and I'm more carefree and I'm happier. I'm also not as grumpy. I involve myself more and don't worry as much. Exercise really helps me.

*Kay* Is it helpful to think about these times when things are better.

*Bethany* Yes. I can sometimes just get too busy with today. I do know that exercise really helps me and that's something I do remember.

*Kay* Does looking at the drawing help you remember?

*Bethany* Yes. If I wasn't here though I wouldn't think of some of the other things that help me

*Kay* Is it useful to look at the drawing and be reminded?

*Bethany* Yes

Julie also revisited her drawing. This is her story of one thing that she has coped with in the past.

*Julie* Feeling down.

*Kay* What was different that enabled you to cope?

*Julie* There were less problems in my life so I could cope more.

*Kay* What did you do that was different then?

*Julie* I guess I just forgot and pushed away my problems – but now I just hang onto them.

*Kay* How did you forget and push away your problems then?

*Julie* I danced in my room. I also went to the garage and punched the punching bag and I focused on something else. I just did things and didn't over think about things.

*Kay* Is it helpful to think about dancing in your room, going into the garage and punching the bag and focusing on other things?

*Julie* Yes – I just need to do them more now – you forget what you used to do.

*Kay* So it's helpful to look at the drawing and be reminded?

*Julie* Yes

### **6.2.2 The Counsellor's Story**

I had reflected on the first session with Julie and Bethany and noted their comments on how helpful it was. I was keen to see how the drawing could be used again as a possible place for further exception conversations and to provide a place for new discoveries. In this counselling session both students were able to identify something on their Current Island that they had coped with in the past and the resulting exception conversations clearly identified transferable strategies that they could deploy again.

I believe this was a simple strategy that worked. I am aware that in busy day-to-day counselling there can be so many other demands that it can be difficult to indulge the time for some of these creative ideas and ways of working. I am discovering that time spent on creating a picture of what the student wants to talk about or an exception example can actually save time. They are a resource created by the student – relevant for them. The drawings can create a space for opening up and extending conversations and these may be revisited. These drawings can be a place where any changes or shifts in the perception of the problem can be noted and talked about and the drawings can evolve, or change drastically, to represent this. More drawings can be added when and where appropriate. They can stay with the case notes in the counsellor's office or be taken home as a source for inspiration outside of counselling. They can also go on the wall (if agreed to by the student) as a source of conversations with others.

### **6.2.3 Analysis**

My first research question looks at how the Exception Question can bring about change for students. As I consider this research question, often by reviewing students' feedback, I am always also considering lessons I can take from the experience, and so responding to my third

research question: How does this experience of using the Exception Question influence my counselling and my ongoing learning as a counsellor?

In this session the students revisited their drawings from the previous session. Whilst both students were able to identify that it was helpful looking at the drawings, both commented that if they weren't here at counselling they might not remember or think of some of the other things that help. Connie (2009) acknowledges that exceptions can be small and whilst both the students identified an exception I did not do enough to amplify these. Connie stresses the importance of amplifying exceptions identified by the client so they become more powerful for them. In this story both students identified exceptions, and claimed that the exercise had been helpful; however, I could have done more to amplify these so the students could reconceptualise their exceptions and access them again.

Whilst the students found this to be a helpful exercise the week earlier, this session really highlighted to me how revisiting the drawings had been part of my agenda and that I needed to seek greater clarity as to what the students wanted. So, as I consider this reflection against my first research question, the use of the Exception Question in solution-focused therapy must be driven by the client with the counsellor positioning themselves alongside. As Connie (2009) argues, the counsellor needs to listen to the client's story through the client's filters while setting aside their own. As I moved between the positions of student counsellor, high-school counsellor and researcher, I had different concerns and priorities, and this reflective experience reminded me that the concerns and priorities of the client are of foremost importance, and that the demands of my research must yield to these. While my desire to explore creative ways of using the Exception Question was and is founded on the desire to help clients, I must follow the lead of the client (Connie, 2009), respectful of and receptive to their needs and goals.

### **6.3 Story 3 (27 September 2013)**

#### **6.3.1 Julie and Bethany's Stories**

The counselling session began with Julie saying that she would like to talk about things at home, how she would like people to talk nicely to each other. Bethany said that things were good for her and she was enjoying dancing and hanging out with friends.

In this session I used brightly-coloured, shaped foam stickers for the students to represent the story of their session. I had seen my colleagues use the stickers in a group session with a tutor from university and I was keen to trial this with students. The transcription below covers only the part of the counselling session where the stickers were used.

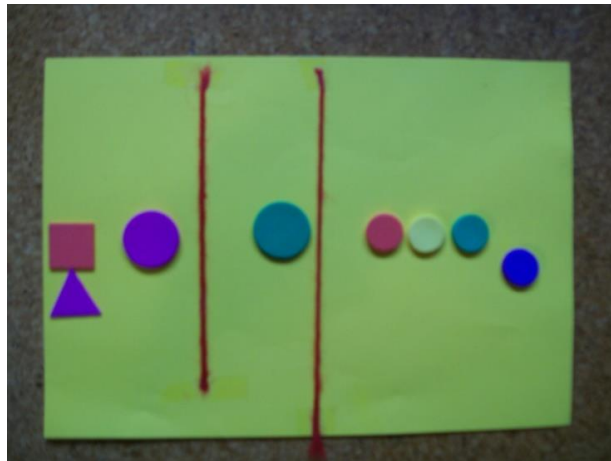


Figure 9: Julie's story

Julie put words to her visual story:

The story was when Dad was choosing a TV channel and acting like a dictatorship. The TV is in the first square with Dad. Then there's a wall – it's not a real wall – but it may as well be – between Dad and Mum who is in the next section. Then there's another wall separating Mum from us kids. When we watch TV Dad chooses what we watch. Mum has a bit of a say but we have no say. When we sit together there is never any talking. We even sit together for breakfast and dinner but we don't talk together.

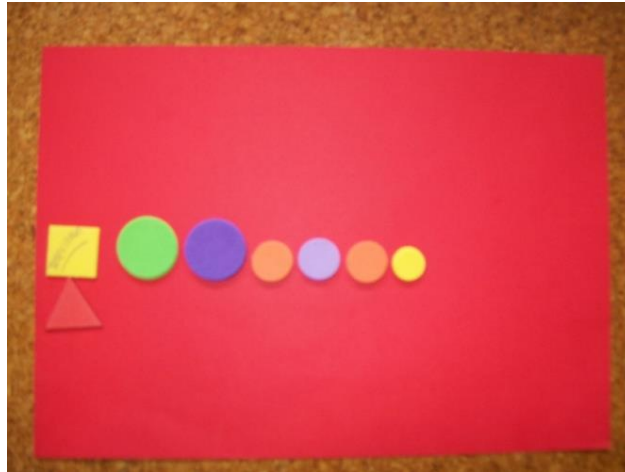


Figure 10: Julie's preferred story

Julie then described her preferred story:

This was a time when I was younger. It was a time in the past and I wasn't aware of the problems in the family. We would all sit together to watch a movie or a programme on TV. And we would talk nicely to each other. When I look at that picture I think of when we used to talk together and listen to each other. I'd like to talk to Dad more. It's easier to talk with Dad when Mum is there. I can talk in the car and or in his office when Mum is there – that helps.

Bethany also represented her story with the stickers.



Figure 11: Bethany's current story

Bethany described her story: "In the picture is my family and we are all getting on. I'm happy in the picture because I'm getting enough sleep, I'm making time for myself and I'm getting enough exercise".

The girls shared their stories and then we talked about them.

*Kay*           What was it like listening to each other's stories?

*Bethany*       Well I feel good at the moment but I understand when things are hard

*Julie*           It was good listening to things going well for Bethany at the moment. It makes me think about things I need to do for me to look after me.

*Kay*           How helpful was it using the foam stickers to represent a story in a counselling session?

*Bethany*       It made it more relaxing.

*Julie*           It made me see what's really happening more clearly.

### **6.3.2 The Counsellor's Story**

This was a session in which I trialled something new. I had talked with the students in Story 1 about my motivation to explore some creative ways of working with art or drawing to complement my counselling sessions. The feedback from the students indicated that this had been helpful. I felt that their representations honoured the story that the girls had shared and surpassed verbal expression on its own.

The art represented a contextual situation unique for the students. This increased their self-awareness in their own context. Bethany's story of a time when everything was going well gives an example of her self-awareness – "I'm happy in the picture because I'm getting enough sleep, I'm making time for myself and I'm getting enough exercise". Julie became aware that she would "like to talk to Dad more. It's easier to talk with Dad when Mum is there – and I can talk in the car or in the office when Mum is there – that helps".



By having two students together the self-awareness was enhanced. Their stories were different and this allowed the girls to think about the situation of their friend, as well as their own. For Bethany, Julie's story made her think about difficult times, but feel glad that things were going well at that time; for Julie, Bethany's story offered hope and motivation, her goal being to talk with her Dad more. This exchange of stories helped Julie to position herself differently in relation to her problems, as she considered being responsible for what she was thinking, feeling and doing and making choices for herself.

Bethany and Julie then discussed helpful choices that they could make; both contributing ideas and listening to each other. For Bethany it was to do more of the same and for Julie it was to hang out with Dad a bit more and to talk with him about things he was doing. Solution-focused therapy emphasises that new opportunities can be created by putting energy into the solutions rather than the problems and using the students' strengths and resources to do so.

Julie's story externalised the problem, reframed it and concretised it. More art or drawing could be added to enhance or change the story if they chose to do so. There is potential to revisit this on another occasion if and when relevant or to take beyond the counselling environment as a source of inspiration and hope for the time ahead.

### **6.3.3 Analysis**

In this story Julie identified stepping stones towards change, suggesting the potential of the Exception Question to bring about – or reveal ways towards – change. Julie's story highlights the two-way perspective of solution-focused therapy as it looks backwards at exception times and concurrently forwards, thinking about how strategies and competencies can be used to move beyond current obstacles and challenges (Jones- Smith, 2012). Julie came to the counselling session with a clear goal – she would like to talk about things at home and she would like people to talk nicely to each other. Through the work done in the counselling session Julie was able to identify her exception, her preferred story. Morgan (2000) notes that the narrative construct of finding a “preferred story” enables clients to deconstruct the problem-saturated talk and to move towards more empowering narratives. Julie's visual representation of her story helped Julie to identify helpful choices she could make as well as a goal of talking more with her father. Julie was also able to identify things she needed to think about through listening to Bethany. Bethany was able to affirm Julie's ideas and her plan.

She was also able to recognise that for her at this time things were going well: “we are all getting on. I’m happy because I’m getting enough sleep, I’m making time for myself and I’m getting enough exercise”. These stepping stones to change support the solution-focused tenet that “small steps can lead to big changes” (Connie and Metcalf, 2009, p. 304).

Figures 9, 10 and 11 represent Julie and Bethany’s experiences of a creative application of the solution-focused question. Julie commented that her art “made me see what’s really happening more clearly”, explaining, “When I look at the picture I think of when we used to talk together and listen to each other”. After recognising this, Julie made it a goal “to talk to dad more” and then identified some small steps she could take to make this happen: “It’s easier to talk with dad when mum is there. I can talk in the car or in his office when mum is there. That helps”. This helped Julie find a way to move forward. The drawing helped Julie to externalise, concretise and reframe her problem, and made it easier for her to talk about her exception.

As I reflect on the creative applications of the Exception Question in this story, and how it helped to bring about change for the students, I am also articulating my own discoveries, responding, essentially, to my third research question on how this experience influenced me. The three stories of Julie and Bethany reveal to me the power of art and drawing to give people hope by helping them to see a situation in a new way. Just as a visual representation of a problem or an exception can stimulate conversations, it also provides opportunities for revisiting this exception/problem in subsequent sessions.

The story, as it includes the students’ feedback and my earlier reflections, also influences me by suggesting potential benefits of allowing students to draw or simply doodle, even if such doodles seem meaningless. Unlike Julie, Bethany simply found the experience of drawing “relaxing”, and this response is interesting to me. I have observed many students come into my room, sit down, pick up pens and begin to draw or doodle. Sometimes these drawings become topics to talk about, other times they don’t. Perhaps an exercise that seems meaningless – if allowed to develop – can reveal meanings not immediately apparent: it might foster creativity or stimulate thinking and conversation or it might change the atmosphere in the room and provide a much-needed breathing space for the client. Just as it is important that I don’t insist on a creative exercise if the client is resistant, it is important that I

don't interrupt a client's creative impulse simply because I can't, in that moment, see its merit or meaning.

Drawing can also accommodate communication that does not involve the client sitting still and upright in a chair while maintaining eye contact; and therefore can make the counselling experience less threatening. I am comfortable talking about a serious topic without putting pressure on students to sit still and maintain eye contact. My early childhood background has given me grounding in this, an appreciation that for some people, adults and children, listening and engaging can happen in ways outside of a rigid communication model. I am familiar with this in the educational space – and I am gaining greater appreciation of how this applies in the context of counselling. I am not saying that there is not a place or a time for more structure and adherence to conventions, but for me, at this time, it is helpful to think about being flexible in the ways I work as I respond to students who are 'the experts in their own lives', and who may themselves be in a strange place as they attend counselling.

## **Chapter 7: Limitations**

### **7.1 Recruiting students**

I had difficulty recruiting students for my study. The University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee stipulates that participating students must have parental consent. This was also a requirement of the school. In terms of recruiting students for my study, this was a problem because many students who come to counselling do not want their parents to know about it. The first three students I invited to join my study declined because of this. Emily joined the study after a counselling session with her mother. At the end of the session I talked with them both about my study, providing them with the written information, and I invited them to participate. They both agreed. After that when I invited students to consider participating I had a conversation with them at that time about the need for parental consent. In the study I was able to recruit four students with parental consent. There were also no boys in my study. Whilst I did work with many boys throughout the study, all of the boys I invited to participate declined.

I do not believe that this Limitation compromises the data; however it did mean that parental consent, and the student's willingness to seek such consent, became my only criteria for including a student: due to the difficulties of acquiring this consent, I used all the students who were willing to participate and who had consent to do so. I would have liked to have included other students, for whom parental consent was not gained, as many of the students I worked with this year added a different dimension to what I was doing, as I considered the Exception Question and its influence on my counselling practice. However this was not possible.

### **7.2 Observer comments**

I had planned to spend twenty minutes immediately after a counselling session making observer comments and aligning these with the notes taken during the session. This did not happen as I usually had other counselling students to see. Taking such notes may have added depth to my study, as I captured the immediate impact that the session had had on me.

However, I did make brief notes at the end of the session while the students were completing their feedback (Appendix A) and these were used along with my reflections in conversations with my counsellor supervisor.

### **7.3 Rating scales**

I had intended that students would complete short rating scales as part of the information and feedback process in the counselling sessions. However I made an early decision not to include these forms because students were already completing video recording consent forms at the start of the session and the modified scaling feedback template at the end of the session (Appendix A). It would have been beneficial to have had some more general session information and feedback which these forms would provide. However I decided not to include rating scales because there was so much form-filling for students to do as it was.

The busyness and exigencies of working in a high-school counselling department should be mentioned here, next to the issue of form-filling. Sometimes forms were not completed simply because something of much greater urgency and importance arose. Needless-to-say when a student urgently needs support this takes precedence over demands of my study – counselling always comes first.

### **7.4 Transcribing the stories and obtaining feedback**

I would have liked to have been able to transcribe the counselling sessions and return these to the students before the next session to check for accuracy and to get feedback. As it was, the counselling stories were transcribed at the end of all the counselling sessions. This was a limitation, as my data may have reflected more of the counselling process and what this was like from the students' perspective had I been able to do this. In saying this, getting students to read their stories in this way might have been too intrusive on my part and disruptive to them.

Logistically this was simply not possible as I juggled my study and my placement demands. However the conversations I had with the students at the end of all the sessions when they revisited all of their stories generated very useful data. I would add that, for me, transcribing the sessions together was incredibly valuable: I was able to immerse myself in individual stories, while viewing them collectively and identifying the narrative threads that tied them together.

### **7.5 Reliability of feedback**

The reliability, in terms of both honesty and accuracy, of the students' written and verbal feedback could be viewed as a limitation, one which I must address, here, given the centrality of student feedback to this study. The students knew that they were doing this for me as part of my study, and that I would be reading their responses, which may have influenced them: they may have said things because they suspected that this was what was expected of them or to affirm me.

I did not give the students particular questions to answer or any other specific direction as to what sort of feedback I wanted – because I didn't want to influence or limit their responses. I simply invited them to note down – as honestly and as accurately as they could – what came into their minds as they read their stories now and thought back to what it was like for them sharing their stories with me.

In my study there were many opportunities – indeed invitations – for students to give me feedback, at the end of each session as well as after the students had read their transcribed stories. In fact, I would say that it is in the nature of counselling to look for and respond to feedback, albeit indirect feedback, throughout the exchange: I found myself constantly reading the body language of students and considering their responses in order to gauge how they were feeling about my questions and the session more generally. Responding in this way is fundamental to counselling which is why I felt the need to give students the opportunity for more direct feedback and to incorporate this as part of my narrative case study. While there are inherent issues with this process, I felt that the trusting and respectful relationships I established with the students meant that they could be honest both with themselves and with me when they gave feedback.

## **7.6 Technology failure**

I failed to record all of the sessions as the technology I was using to record the sessions failed on two occasions. I always had the video camera set up ready to go so that the session could start smoothly and the focus was on the student. When the camera did not work I made the decision at the time not to interrupt the student's counselling time by trying to fix this. This meant that, on these occasions, I missed some of the detail and the nonverbal aspects of the counselling session. However I ensured I spent time immediately after these sessions expanding on my notes and making comments so I had a more comprehensive write-up. The

students' feedback and conversations we had about the transcribed counselling stories also helped fill some of these gaps.

### **7.7 Recording feedback sessions**

I would have like to have recorded on video the time I spent with students when I met with them to check for accuracy of their transcribed story and received feedback on them. By not recording these sessions I had to rely on the notes I took and on my memory and probably missed some of the subtleties of these conversations. It certainly would have been helpful to record these conversations, to capture not only the responses but *how* they were given.

### **7.8 Recording supervision sessions**

I had not anticipated before my study how useful it would have been to have videoed my counselling supervision sessions with Ben. This was a problem because I needed to rely on notes taken during these sessions instead. However as I met with Ben weekly for supervision, and more often if I needed to, I felt I was always able to check anything out with him. The availability of Ben for this purpose was very important in the way it supported my reflective practice and critical thinking. Considering the frequency with which these conversations occurred, sometimes scheduled, other times not, recording each conversation would have posed a logistical challenge.

## Chapter 8: Discussion

This study highlights some unique contributions to the field of counselling. It provides:

- Practice-based evidence that Exception Questions are powerful and helpful to clients.
- A way of using drawings and art to explore looking at exceptions.
- Evidence of how clients' drawings and art can complement or replace the standard scale in solution-focused therapy.
- A creative approach in using stories for the purposes of counselling research.
- Evidence of how drawings can be used to help clients build onto or chart changes to their story each session.
- Evidence that clients appreciate and find it helpful to give feedback on their counselling sessions.
- Evidence that ongoing reflection throughout the research process reveals new ideas and develops understanding.
- An approach to carrying out research which is accessible to counselling trainees and which they might also adopt.

This is a simple qualitative study. It tells the stories of Emily, Larry, Julie and Bethany alongside my stories as a counsellor. The layering of the stories enabled me to see how the students' stories influenced my stories as a counsellor, which in turn influenced other student and counsellor stories. Polkinghorne (1995) suggests that stories hold promise to help unravel an incomplete situation, to describe the relationship among the events and choices in our lives. The process of arranging and thinking deeply about these stories actually helped me to unravel my research questions, giving them solidity and meaning through connecting them to real people and their stories. Berg and Dolan (2001) argue that analytical processes such as interpretation and reframing are analogous to retelling and so recreating stories. Seen in this way, the potential for change rests in the capacity for people to retell (rewrite) the stories that make up their lives. As I embarked on my study I found this idea hugely encouraging; it is only now that I feel I understand it.

Throughout this study my research questions have guided me.



1. Shift happens? How can the Exception Question in solution-focused therapy bring about change for students?
2. How do students in a high school setting experience creative uses of the solution-focused Exception Question?
3. How does its use influence my counselling and my ongoing learning as a counsellor?

I can give many examples which demonstrate how the Exception Question can bring about change for students. Emily's first story, *Chicken Curry*, demonstrates this through Emily's shift in the perception of her problem. Emily's feedback at the end of this counselling session: "It was helpful to think about times where I did have the space and was relaxed. Bringing to my realisation that I could be like this most of the time... helps me find my energy. It gave me a huge energy boost and made me feel more confident in knowing there is more energy there". In Larry's third story, "*Landing Right and Not Falling*", Larry described a time when she had handled a problem differently. This recent exception time was not obvious to Larry until our conversation helped her to reveal it: "It was really great being able to talk. I found out more about what I had done even if I didn't think I had done anything. Such as negotiating with mum! I know what to do next to gain confidence and am proud of what I had done".

Equally, my study provides many examples of how students experience creative applications of the Exception Question. For example, the change in the size of *Pressure and Responsibility* in Emily's drawing (Figure 5) exemplifies how drawings can chart small steps of progress. Larry and Emily both realised that if they had been successful or strong before, they could be this way again. Larry's drawing of her *Backbone*, Figure 6, allowed us to have scaling conversations about any changes in her thinking, to have fun conversations about a serious topic, and to identify how she had already made some progress: "It's getting better as I remember the small steps I have already taken."

However, reflecting on the processes and outcomes of my research against these three questions is not as simple as giving three categorical answers. In the Analysis sections of Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I re-read each of the stories against each of my research questions – a narrative exercise which generated a new layer of meaning (Etherington, 2000). However, as I expressed in my Analysis of Emily's second story, "*After the Holidays*", it is difficult to respond to each question without reference to the others: as I consider how the Exception

Question can bring about change for students and on their experience of a creative application of this technique, I am always also meditating over a response to my third research question – how this affects me and what I can learn from it.

Just as I am aware that I can't answer one question, without also engaging with another, I am equally aware that my reading of one of Emily's stories inevitably overlaps with my reading of one of Larry's – different stories generate similar themes and lessons for me. Etherington argues that narrative analysis, "values the messiness, depth and texture of the lived experience" instead of looking for thematic connections between stories (Etherington, 2004, p. 81). In this chapter I approach my third research question from a wider perspective: rather than simply focusing on how the use of the Exception Question influences me professionally and personally, this chapter makes meaning (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) out of the untidiness and bumpiness of the stories themselves, all the while recognising the significance of the Exception Question in terms of advancing the plot of each story (Polkinghorne, 1995). Reading the stories in this way helps me to appreciate the impact each had on me at the time, and it suggests ways in which I might apply these ideas and lessons to work I do in the future.

Emily's "Chicken Curry" (11 July) had a huge impact on me and the process of reading the transcription of this exchange evokes strong feelings. I recall my sense of dread at recording the session and then watching it, which was related to my feelings of inadequacy; most of all, however, I remember the way that Emily's stories captivated me and the shift of energy that occurred for both of us when the conversation took a more playful turn. Reading this story, I am reminded of the reciprocal nature of all exchanges and how conversations can shift people's energy. The use of the Exception Question highlighted the power of keeping conversations *solutions*-focused, and I felt encouraged to feel my way with it and to keep probing for little exceptions even when they were very difficult for the client to find or they kept slipping back into problem talk.

"After the Holidays" (30 July) emphasised for me the reciprocity of energy that comes when a strong and safe therapeutic alliance is formed. This story was also important in that it started me thinking about how I might bring values and skills from my work in the early childhood sector into counselling; in particular, it got me thinking and talking about play. This is something that the Exception Question invites as its success lies in accessing the skills, and resources that the client already has. In my early childhood teaching I experienced

how creative uses of storytelling could address problems in ways that are nonthreatening and memorable (Henson, Smith and Mayo, 2009). In my counselling I found that by lightening up the conversation and being creative enabled students to see their problems in new ways, to access their exceptions and to celebrate these. This has a huge capacity for bringing about change for students. They experience a sense of empowerment as well as hope through the counsellor's genuine admiration for their strength and resilience (O'Connell, 2005).

For me, "Tiredness" (8 August) was about dabbling with creative and abstract extensions of using the Exception Question. Emily's drawings provided a space to have light-hearted conversations about issues without detracting from their seriousness. This story is about the way drawings can help to make sense of problems by allowing a person to re-position themselves in relation to the problem. It is also about the way that drawings and conversations can inform and influence each other in counselling; the conversation is ongoing and, reflecting this, the drawing can be embellished, modified or scribbled over and re-drawn.

The stories stemming from Emily's "Bob" (11 September) relate to how we see things in different parts and from different perspectives. This applies to viewing the recordings: re-viewing them several times, each time from a different viewpoint, helped me see new things. This process made me think about the values and beliefs I have and how these inform my practice, and also reminded me that the student's values and beliefs are of the greatest importance.

This story is also about the interplay of opposing feelings – seriousness and playfulness for Emily; confidence and vulnerability for me. This story helped me to see myself on both sides of the counselling exchange, as counsellor working with a student and as a student working with a supervisor. This story and the dual perspective it gave me as I reflected on the session, underscored for me the importance of trust in the therapeutic alliance.

The session with Larry which generated the "Backbone" stories (11 September), accentuated how effective art and drawing can be to represent a student's story. My reading of Emily's "Tiredness" and Larry's "Backbone" is similar, as the drawings enabled the students to externalise the problem and consider small steps they could take to improve their situation. This story highlighted for me the simplicity of the solution-focused approach when I feel my

way with it, rather than over-think it, and it confirmed for me the place that art and drawing have within the model.

“My Speech” (17 September) is about the fundamental nature of solution-focused conversation: that delicate relationship between listening and following, and probing for more detail. (Interestingly, the name Larry gave the story has application beyond its original one). This story engages with the idea of sensitivity, which suggests to me two ways of listening and responding. Firstly, it reminds me of the importance of being sensitive to the feelings, attitudes and values of the client, allowing them to either talk uninterrupted or, conversely, avoid talking about something, thereby building trust. Secondly – in a way that is compatible with the first – this idea suggests listening with keen, sensitive ears for opportunities to explore even probe for exceptions so that these can be emphasised for the client (Connie, 2009). As with earlier stories, “My speech” highlights the importance of the therapeutic alliance.

“Landing right and not falling” (26 September) is a story about revisiting a problem and thinking about small steps of progress. Reading the transcript, as well as Larry’s feedback and my reflections, I can see the value of solution-focused therapy, in particular of the Exception Question, as it identifies the strategies and strengths that the person already has. The session helped Larry to identify small steps she could take towards overcoming an obstacle while revealing to her the small steps she had already taken – an uplifting revelation for someone in her situation. Again, the interplay between drawings and conversations – the way these can be revisited and modified – allowed her to *see* these steps; and this confirmed for me the place of art and drawing within the precepts of solution-focused therapy.

Thinking about the place of art and drawing leads nicely into my reading of the stories of Julie and Bethany. Story 1 (15 August) is about identifying aspects of the present and imagining a preferred future, and the visual representations of this helped the girls to see the strengths and resources that they already had, as well as identify steps they could take to improve. This story was also about bringing together the different stories of the girls and considering ways that the girls’ respective drawings and stories might illuminate the situation of their friend. On a basic level, this story is also about the power of art and drawing – when used in conjunction with exception conversations – to give people hope by helping them to see a situation in a new way.

Story 2 (22 August) involved revisiting the drawings Julie and Bethany had done the week before. In the discussion that unfolded, I realised the potential for drawings to chart shifts in perception about a problem and, simultaneously, stimulate further conversations around exception times.

For me, Story 3 (27 September) evidences the power of drawing and the corresponding stories to help people position themselves differently in relation to a problem by promoting self-awareness. But, in a broader sense, this story is also about opening up different ways of communication by being flexible and receptive. Reading in particular Bethany's feedback on her experience, I am reminded that there are potential benefits in inviting students to draw or simply to doodle, even if such doodles seem meaningless. A simple drawing can be used in many different ways to represent a problem. But the actual process of drawing may be inherently beneficial since it collapses certain expectations – such as that the student maintains eye contact, sits upright and answers questions directly – and therefore allows the student to feel more relaxed and less threatened. Just as it is important that I don't insist on a creative exercise if the client is reluctant, it is important that I don't interrupt a client's creative impulse simply because I can't, in that moment, see its merit or meaning. Meanings might become apparent to me over time, or they might not. Either way, doodling is a valid exercise; and it may end up supporting exception conversations, directly or indirectly.

As they engage with the stories, readers will find different aspects of the counselling sessions interesting, draw different meanings from them and ask different questions; and this I welcome. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note, each retelling produces more meaning and understandings, along with more questions. I acknowledge that my reading (analysis) is not an exhaustive one because it responds to three research questions, when there are countless others that might be asked, and because it comes from my experiences. I also acknowledge that *my* reading is not a final one, in the sense that subsequent readings might reveal new things for me.

This study involved putting *myself* into what I was doing and analysing myself in the process. As a result, I believe it closes a perceived gap between carrying out research and being researched. Reading these stories in this way – drawing from each particular ideas and lessons – is helpful to me as each story represents a small step I have made and suggests ways I might apply solution-focused therapy and the Exception Question in my future work. I am

left with this sense of looking in two directions: looking back, there are all the things that went into shaping my experience during this study; forward, there are the ideas I can take from this and how these can feed into future work. To illustrate: my experiences in the early childhood sector influenced me hugely when I found myself in the strange place of a high-school, in the strange role of a counsellor; but, I can see that the stories I have from this experience will now feed back into my work in this sector, as I look with excitement to return to a familiar place but with new, maybe strange, eyes.

## Appendix A: Client Session Rating Scale

### Client Session Rating Scale (CSRS)

Name: _____ Date: _____
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“When we talked about a time when ... (an Exception Question example)

How helpful was that on a scale of 1 to 10?”

1 Not helpful. ----- 10. Fantastically helpful



Comments:

## Appendix B: Video Analysis Sheet

Video Analysis Sheet: “How is ‘Change’ represented here” What does it look like? (A question for clients)

Date:

Client:

View 1: Notice	View 2: Counsellor	View 3: Client	View 4: Researcher	Supervisor input



## Appendix C: “Being true to myself in a strange place” template

### “Being true to myself in a strange place”

Name:_____	Date:_____
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1\_\_\_\_\_10

Reflections:

Input from Supervisor:

So what:

## **Appendix D: Letters and Consents**

### **College of Education**

Kay Henson

Email:

Telephone: (03)3148585



### **Shift Happens? How can the Exception Question in Solution-focused Therapy bring about change for clients and how does its use influence my counselling?**

#### **Information Sheet for Students**

My name is Kay Henson and this year I am working in the Counselling Department at Burnside High School. I am also a second year Masters of Counselling student at the University of Canterbury and as part of my study requirements this year will be undertaking a research project whilst at Burnside.

I am interested in investigating the ways students have solved their own problems in the past and how through my counselling I can more effectively be alongside students so they can do more of it. My research will bring together participants' personal stories as well as their experiences of counselling and my own learning as a counsellor.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study. If you agree to take part you will be asked to do the following:

- Take part in no more than six counselling sessions with each one lasting no more than one hour.

- Be videoed in counselling sessions. I assure you that these will only be seen by myself or my supervisors if they feel it is necessary. There will be a separate consent form to fill out for this and video recording will only be done with your full consent. There is no penalty if you do not wish to be videoed.
- Fill out short surveys - Outcome Rating Scales (ORS) and Session Rating Scales (CSRS) on the counselling sessions you will be participating in.

Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. If you do participate you may withdraw at any time and this will not jeopardise your access to counselling. I will take particular care to ensure the confidentiality of all data collected during the study and I will ensure your anonymity using pseudonyms and disguising your identity in any presentations and publications of the findings.

However, there is a small risk to your full individual anonymity because Mr Sullivan as my counselling supervisor may be able to match issues raised in the counselling process that I share with him, as part of my supervision with him, with the student. The steps I will be taking to minimise this risk is in ensuring that I provide an opportunity for us to talk about any concerns you may have about any sharing of information.

Since data must be stored for at least five years according to college regulations, anonymity of both the school and the participants is assured as I will systematically use pseudonyms to identify the school and individuals. All data collected from this study will be kept in locked and secure facilities at Burnside High School and / or in password protected computer files.

The results of this study may be used to provide new understandings for counsellors and may be submitted for publication to national or international journals or presented at educational conferences. As a participant you will receive a copy of this study and you may at any time ask for additional information or results from the study.

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

If you have any complaints you can contact the Chair of the Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, Email: [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

There will an opportunity for you to ask questions about the study. Mr Sullivan, as my counselling supervisor at Burnside will be another person for you to talk to about the study should you wish to.

If you agree to participate in this study please sign the attached Consent Form and return it to me in the envelope provided.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

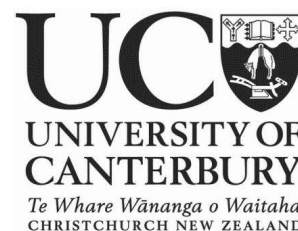
Kay Henson

## College of Education

Kay Henson

Email: [hensonr@xtra.co.nz](mailto:hensonr@xtra.co.nz)

Telephone: (03)3148585



### **Shift Happens? How can the Exception Question in Solution-focused Therapy bring about change for clients and how does its use influence my counselling?**

#### **Consent Form for Students**

(Please tick each box)

☐

**I have read the information sheet and understand what will be required of me if I participate in this project and have been given an opportunity to ask questions.**

☐

**I understand counselling sessions will be recorded on video. There will be a separate consent form to fill out for this and video recording will only be done with my full consent.**

☐

**I have read the information letter and understand that all data collected will only be accessed by Ms Henson or her university supervisors and that it will be kept confidential and secure.**

☐

**I understand that neither I, nor my school, will be identified in any presentations or publications that draw on this research.**

- ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty and withdrawal will not jeopardise access to counselling.
- ☐ I understand that I can receive a report on the findings of this study, either by email or postal address.
- ☐ I understand that I can get more information about this project from Ms Henson and that, if I have any queries or concerns, I can talk to Mr. Sullivan at Burnside High School.
- ☐ I understand that I can contact the University of Canterbury Ethics Committee if I have any complaints about the research.

**I agree to participate in this research.**

**Full name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_

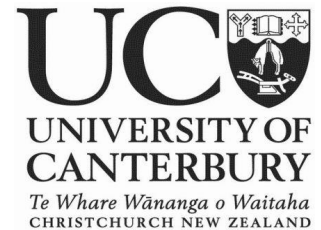
*Please return this consent form in the attached sealed envelope to the counselling department.*

## College of Education

Kay Henson

Email: [hensonr@xtra.co.nz](mailto:hensonr@xtra.co.nz)

Telephone: (03) 3148585



### **Shift Happens? How can the Exception Question in Solution-focused Therapy bring about change for clients and how does its use influence my counselling?**

#### **Information Sheet for Counselling Supervisor**

My name is Kay Henson and this year I am working in the Counselling Department at Burnside High School. As a second year Masters of Counselling student at the University of Canterbury and as part of my study requirements this year I will be undertaking a research project whilst at Burnside.

I am interested in investigating the ways that students have solved their own problems in the past and how through my counselling I can more effectively be alongside students so they can do more of it. My research will bring together participants' personal stories as well as their experiences of counselling and my own learning as a counsellor.

I am grateful for the role you already have as my counselling supervisor at Burnside High School and I would like to extend an invitation to you to be involved in my research project. Please note that participation in this study is voluntary. If you do participate you may withdraw at any time.

If you agree to take part you will be asked to do the following:

- to obtain informed consent from prospective participants, and as I will be the person conducting the study it is important that students have another person that they can talk to about the study.
- to support me to reflect on the counselling process to ensure at all times the safety of vulnerable participants. I will keep a reflective journal or diary to document these reflections.

Video recording will only be done with the full consent of participants and there will be a separate consent form to fill out for this.

I will take particular care to ensure confidentiality and anonymity for participants using pseudonyms and disguising participants' identity in any presentations and publications of the findings. However, I have informed potential participants that there is a small risk to full individual anonymity because you, as my counselling supervisor may be able to match issues raised in the counselling process that I share with you, as part of my supervision, with the student. The steps I will be taking to minimise this risk is in ensuring that I provide an opportunity for participants to talk about any concerns they may have about any sharing of information.

Since data must be stored for at least five years according to college regulations, anonymity of both the school and the participants is assured as I will systematically use pseudonyms to identify the school and individuals. All data collected from this study will be kept in locked and secure facilities at Burnside High School and / or in password protected computer files.

The results of this study may be used to provide new understandings for counsellors and may be submitted for publication to national or international journals or presented at educational conferences. As a participant you will receive a copy of this study and you may at any time ask for additional information or results from the study.

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

I will adhere to the ethics codes of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors. Participants will be able to discuss any concerns or queries with either you or myself. If they have any



complaints they can contact the Chair of the Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, Email: [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)

If you agree to participate in this study please sign the attached Consent Form and return it to me in the envelope provided.

Kay Henson

## College of Education

Kay Henson

Email: [hensonr@xtra.co.nz](mailto:hensonr@xtra.co.nz)

Telephone: (03) 3148585



### **Shift Happens? How can the Exception Question in Solution-focused Therapy bring about change for clients and how does its use influence my counselling?**

#### **Consent Form for Counselling Supervisor**

- ☐ I have been given a full explanation of this project and have been given an opportunity to ask questions.
- ☐ I understand what will be required of me if I agree to take part in the project.
- ☐ I understand that any data collected from this study will be kept in locked and secure facilities at Burnside High School and that pseudonyms will be used in the study to ensure anonymity for both the school and individuals.
- ☐ I understand that I will receive a report on the findings of this study. I have provided my email details below for this.

☐ If I have any complaints I can contact the Chair of the Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

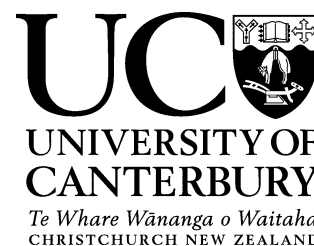
## College of Education

Kay Henson

12 Mill Road,

Leithfield. RD1

Amberley



12 May 2013

Dear Parents, Whanau, Guardians

My name is Kay Henson and this year I am working in the Counselling Department at Burnside High School. As a second year Masters of Counselling student at the University of Canterbury and as part of my study requirements this year I will be undertaking a research project whilst at Burnside.

I am particularly interested in investigating the ways that students have solved their own problems in the past and how through my counselling I can work more effectively alongside students to assist them further. My research will bring together participants' personal stories as well as their experiences of counselling and my own learning as a counsellor.

I am asking for your permission for your child to participate in this study as they are under the age of eighteen and this is a requirement of the Ethics Committee. Your child will also receive a separate Information Letter and Consent Form. If your child agrees to take part they will be asked to do the following:

- Take part in no more than six counselling sessions with each one lasting no more than one hour.
- Be videoed in counselling sessions. I assure you that these will only be seen by myself or my supervisor, Mr Sullivan, if he feels it is necessary. There will be a separate consent form to fill out for this and video recording will only be done with your child's full consent. There is no penalty if they do not wish to be videoed.
- Fill out short surveys - Outcome Rating Scales (ORS) and Session Rating Scales (CSRS) Form on their counselling sessions.

Please note that participation in this is voluntary. If your child does participate, they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and this will not jeopardise their access to counselling. I will take particular care to ensure the confidentiality of all data gathered for the study and ensure their anonymity using pseudonyms and disguising participants' identity in any presentations and publications of the findings.

All data collected from this study will be kept in locked and secure facilities at Burnside High School and / or in password protected computer files.

The results of this study may be used to provide new understandings for counsellors and may be submitted for publication to national or international journals or presented at educational conferences.

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

The College requires that all participants be informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which the research project is conducted may contact the Chair of

the Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury,  
Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, Email: [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

Please contact me if you have any questions about the project or would like to be informed  
about the research findings. I can be reached on: 0276347328 or by email:  
[hensonr@xtra.co.nz](mailto:hensonr@xtra.co.nz)

For further clarification you are welcome to contact my supervisor, Dr Judi Miller at the  
University of Canterbury, College of Education [judi.miller@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:judi.miller@canterbury.ac.nz)

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Thank you for taking the time to read this Information Sheet. If you agree for your child  
taking part in this study please sign the attached Consent Form and return it to me in the  
envelope provided.

Yours sincerely

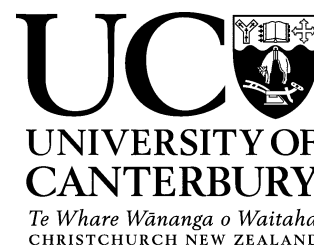
Kay Henson

## College of Education

Kay Henson

Email: [hensonr@xtar.co.nz](mailto:hensonr@xtar.co.nz)

Telephone: (03) 3148585



## Parental Consent

- I have been given a full explanation of this project and have been given an opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand what will be required of my child if he/ she agrees to take part in the project.
- I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any stage without penalty.
- I understand that any information or opinions that my child provides will be kept confidential to the researcher and that any published or reported results will not identify my child or family.
- I understand that all data collected for this study will be kept in locked and secure facilities at Burnside High School.
- I understand that my child will receive a report on the findings of this study.
- I understand that if I require further information I can contact the researcher, Kay Henson. If I have any complaints I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Research Human Ethics Committee. By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return this completed consent form to Kay Henson in the envelope provided.

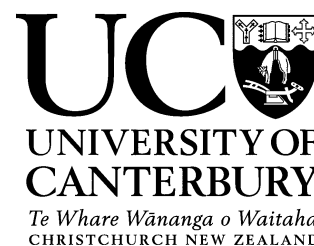
## College of Education

Kay Henson

12 Mill Road,

Leithfield. RD1

Amberley



18/6/ 2013

The Principal

Burnside High School

Greers Road

Christchurch

Dear Mr. Maguire

I am writing to request permission from you for some students from your school to take part in my research project.

This year I will be completing my Masters of Counselling degree at the University of Canterbury and as part of my study requirements will be undertaking a research project whilst doing my counselling practicum at Burnside.

My research project is titled “Shift Happens? How can the Exception Question in solution-focused therapy bring about change for students and how does its use influence my counselling?” I am particularly interested in investigating the ways that students have solved their own problems in the past and how through my counselling I can more effectively be alongside students so they can do more of it.



No more than five participants will be invited to be part of this research study. They will all be students who have been coming to counselling or beginning counselling when the project begins. Consultation on who to invite will take place between myself and Ben Sullivan, my counselling supervisor, giving consideration to the problems students are presenting with and how being part of the study may impact on their participation in counselling.

A Narrative Case Study will form the framework of this study and solution-focused therapy will be the counselling modality used in the sessions. My research will bring together participants' personal stories as well as their experience of counselling in no more than six sessions. My own learning as a counsellor will be woven into these stories. Mr Sullivan as my counselling supervisor will support this reflexivity. Participants will be invited to complete short rating scales – Outcome Rating Scales (ORS) and Session Rating Scales (CSRS). Sessions will be videoed with recording only being done with the full consent of participants and there will be a separate consent form to fill out for this.

I will take particular care to ensure confidentiality and anonymity for participants using pseudonyms and disguising participants' identity in any presentations and publications of the

findings. I will inform potential participants that there is a small risk to full individual

anonymity because my counselling supervisor may be able to match issues raised in the counselling process as part of my supervision, with the student. The steps I will be taking to minimise this risk is in ensuring that I have their consent to share any information.

Parental consent will also be gained and they will have the right to withdraw their child at any time.

Participation in the research is entirely voluntary. Students may withdraw at any time and this will not jeopardise their access to counselling.

Data must be stored for at least five years according to University of Canterbury regulations. Anonymity of both the school and the participants will be assured as I will systematically use pseudonyms to identify the school and individuals. All data collected from this study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and / or in password protected computer files.

The results of this study will be used to provide new understandings for counsellors including the Burnside High School Counselling Department and may be submitted for publication to national or international journals or presented at educational conferences.

This project has received ethical approval from the University of Canterbury, Educational Research Human Ethics Committee.

The College requires that all participants be informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which the research project is conducted may contact the Chair of the Canterbury Educational Research Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch, Email: [human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

Please contact me if you have any other queries or concerns about the project or would like to be informed about the research findings. I can be reached on: 0276347328 or by email : [hensonr@xtra.co.nz](mailto:hensonr@xtra.co.nz)

For further clarification you are welcome to contact my supervisor, Dr Judi Miller at the University of Canterbury, College of Education [judi.miller@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:judi.miller@canterbury.ac.nz)

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If you agree for your school to participate in this study please sign the attached Consent Form and return it in the envelope provided.

Kind regards

Kay Henson

### **Declaration of Consent**

I consent to my school participating in the project “Shift Happens? How can the Exception Question in solution-focused therapy bring about change for clients and how does its use influence my counselling?”

I have read and understood the information provided to me concerning the research project and what will be required of the students and the school counsellor when we participate in the project.

I understand that the information we provide to the researcher will be treated as confidential and that no findings that could identify either the students or my school will be published.

I understand that our participation in the project is voluntary and that we may withdraw students from the project at any time without incurring penalty.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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